

IN THE WEST COUNTRY



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IN THE WEST COUNTRIE

VOL. II.

IN THE WEST COUNTRIE

BY

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“QUEENIE,” “ORANGE LILY,” “A JEWEL OF A GIRL,”
“MY LOVE, SHE’S BUT A LASSIE,”
&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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IN THE WEST COUNTRIE.

CHAPTER I.

THE night was half-spent. But our ball
was not flagging at all! rather, as
supper began in the lighted-up conserva-
tories, the dancers sped round with fresh
vigour in the clearer space of the great hall.

Every one seemed happy: all amused.

As I was resting beside a pillar with Mr.
Bracy, after our first dance together, we
detected Mrs. General Jones and another
old busybody carefully threading their way
down the side of the hall; their eyes fixed

on the walls with curious intentness, though discreetly ; and their lips moving. ‘ One hundred and eighty-nine,’ we heard murmured sagaciously as they passed us. ‘ Are you taking that chandelier on the far side, my dear Mrs. General ? One hundred and ninety-five already, I do declare, and real wax every candle of them.

‘ Well, well. No one can better afford it than dear, good Mr. Brown Sugar, as they call him ; and a very good name too, considering his sweetness of disposition,’ placidly returned the she-general.

Mr. Fulke—as I still secretly called him in mind—met my eyes, and we both laughed. It was now the middle of the ball, but this was the first dance I had in honesty been able to give him, to my regret. Alice, however, had unscrupulously thrown over her other partners

to dance three times already with him ; assuring every one she talked to that night, in her impulsive childish fashion, that he was the most fascinating man she had met with *for ages !*

‘There certainly is a different *régime* here from what I remember in my young days, of our troubled fortunes. I can truly assure you that I am glad the old traditions of Stoke are so delightfully revived, for your family’s sake, as well as that the dear old place is so well kept up,’ said Mr. Bracy, with an earnest tone running through the well-bred easy lightness of his speech. It told me he was keenly sensible of the feeling that he was here, a stranger, dancing in the home of his forefathers ; but would not allow himself to weigh on our sympathies at all, for that.

It would have given me real pleasure to have said a word or two, showing him I

could enter a little way into the mingled crowd of memories, regrets, and associations I felt certain he *must* feel ; but foolish shyness weighted my tongue. The thoughts were all in my head. I could have almost spoken them with my eyes, loving Stoke's every stone and tree and grass-blade as I did, and so intensely pitying him ; my heart was so soft and wide-set this night with my own vague gladness I would have had all the world as happy—But not a word of what would have been graceful to utter would come, though I did look up at him. At last, after a pause, came merely the blundering question : ‘I beg your pardon—but why was it you called yourself only Mr. Fulke on Dartmoor ? ’

‘Did I call myself so ? I think rather that it was Mrs. Gladman who used to address me so by my Christian name, having known

me very well ; whilst with Jack there was no mister-ing, but he called me “ plain Fulke ”—as a mother once said with pride of her ugly son, when the neighbours called him Johnny or Jack, “ His name is plain John.”

My old friend laughed at his simple tale himself—it may have been to hide some amusement at another thought—but that did not strike me at the time, so I answered, staidly :

‘ It was my mistake, and Bob’s then. How silly you must have thought us ! ’

Fulke Bracy turned quickly to look at me, and my good faith seemed to beget his, for he immediately apologized.

‘ Not quite so ! To confess all, since you look at me in such an intensely truthful way yourself, the mistake once begun, I rather wished to encourage it. I own (being now

cured, and ashamed of the feeling) that at that time the memories of Stoke were still so sore and dear to me, that though it was a delight to hear you both constantly praising and describing it, there was a relief in your not knowing me as its unfortunate exile.'

'Oh, Mr. Bracy, I *am* so, so sorry—'

'Thank you very much; you may be sorry for me now, since it gratifies without grieving me. I do assure you, it quite gladdens me to see Stoke in the possession of such a man as your father, whom I had never met before. We have just had a long talk together; and he has taken me so kindly round the rooms to see his few changes. He did it with a thoughtfulness I shall never forget.'

'Dear father! that is so like him,' I cried, lighting up with animation, and a flush of pleasure.

‘Why, there ! Now I recognize you again as the excited young Atalanta of our otter-hunt,’ returned my old friend with the new name, his face brightening and his manner unbending also. Now *I* remembered how handsome I had thought him ; and was not surprised at Alice’s present infatuation, for he *was* a very good-looking man. He went on : ‘Do you remember that morning when I found you water-bound on a rock in the Teign—?’

‘Yes, yes, Mr. Bracy ; and do *you* remember how you brought me back to Wheatfield Farm on the pony, and the mornings we all three went fishing, and—and—’

How eagerly we went on chatting together, each rousing the other to fresh pleasant recollections ! When at last, in the first pause, we both succeeded in securing ourselves another dance out of the pencilled

imbroglio of my card, it was with the most mutual good-fellowship and genuine gladness at having, as it were, found again our old friendship intact though so long forgotten.

Then came John Gladman. He lumbered round the room holding me in a hot tight grasp. This only grew tighter and tighter, as I found it more and more difficult to move. He, too, said : ‘ How awfully this reminds me of our jolly days down at the old farm—eh, Pleasance ! ’

‘ Does it ? ’ I just let fall from my lips, glancing rather primly round, for mother might be near ; and *Clair was !* And both in their several minds might think strangely of hearing John Gladman call me *Pleasance* in his big-baby fashion. Besides, my toes were pounded to a sore jelly, and my beautiful white dress—a Parisian dream, over which Clair had

just raved—was being ill-used if not absolutely torn by John's plunges into battle, as his dancing resembled. So I just added, my words unconsciously freezing to ice-drops : ‘I am greatly surprised, you remember me so well at all.’

‘Oh, but come now!—that otter-hunt! I don't forget how splendidly you took your fences that day. There never was a girl more after my heart than you were then. Besides, if even I had been likely to forget you, mother would have kept me up to the mark. And I say, Pleasance’ (blushing considerably) ‘how awfully pretty—no, not that, but something more—you've grown. You don't mind my saying that? Oh, come, for auld lang syne's sake, you know—and I've been watching you from a distance all the evening; on my word of honour I have. You're so like

some of those quiet madonnas, or nymphs, I used to see in the galleries when I was abroad.'

John had once been 'abroad,' as he called it, from Paris to Dresden; and would probably remain contented therewith, and refer to that time of vast experience all his life.

Now, to my annoyance (much as I really liked him), he pleadingly ended: 'And look here, Pleasance, you will give me another waltz, won't you? A square?—I hate them! This next one, now . . . I'm certain there was nobody down for it on your card when I tried to take a peep a few minutes ago. There *is* nobody else—is there?'

'The next is my dance, I believe; is it not, Miss Brown?' said St. Leger's voice just then quickly, with a flash as of jealousy in his eyes, as passing he bent them on me.

And I—knowing it was the last one unappropriated on my discreetly-guarded card (having refused dozens of ineligible suitors), and one more than Clair had even ventured to ask at the beginning of the evening—acquiesced by a silent gesture with inward tremorous joy. How glad I was then that Bob's adoring satellites—all the athletic young ‘wet-bobs’ and ‘dry-bobs’ who followed him as their leader with hero-worshipping eyes—had chosen Rose unanimously for their bright little goddess rather than my colder, paler self.

Instead of dancing, Clair led me straight away through the conservatories to our fernery; and I went as if in a dream. In the distance among palms, flowers, and lights, we saw all the earthlier mortals supping—father, mother, with the duchess and her nearest in rank, at a larger one among many

delightful, mushroom-like tables for two, that were dotted fairy-fashion about the glass houses. My sister, Alice, and Mr. Bracy were at one of these latter, *tête-à-tête*; and, as we softly passed by, I was aware—without much heeding it—that my old friend looked up and saw me.

In the same way, I seemed to know that Clair was watching his opportunity to avoid my mother's quick-eyed observation; but neither did this trouble me. He must be always right in my love-bewitched eyes, except, indeed—when he neglected me *too much*. The fernery was the greenest, coolest, stilllest of retreats. Hidden, as it was, far, far away at the end of a suite of hot-houses which made quite a small winter garden, we found nothing and no one there save ourselves and the goldfish swimming in their dimly-

seen basins. Tree-ferns, whose great fronds drooped in feathery screens ; groves of small up-springing palms ; smaller ferns fringing the walls in close luxuriance on all sides of us ; creepers trailing, twining, and hanging down overhead and on all sides of us. It was green, dim, everywhere around !

Only two lamps softly half-lighted our bower ; showing us, however, all we then seemed to care for—that was, each other. The atmosphere was lulling and fragrant. Only our two selves ! and theplash of tiny waterfalls for all sound, babbling unseen amongst the foliage. We sat, side by side, on a low couch (I can remember still the Indian gold-worked cushions on it) ; and for a perceptible time neither of us spoke.

I could not think, could not find a word to break the strange silence, but felt only

happy; in a dream; and waiting. Clair's eyes were bent down, too; and supposing he was dreaming like myself, I was satisfied.

To my surprise, when he looked up and spoke, it was with an entirely new tone—partly deprecating anger as of one who has no right to be angry; partly a kind of tender jealousy.

‘Who is this new swain of yours, this Gladman who calls you *Pleasance*!—and whose mother seems to consider you her especial property, by the way she watches you? He is an only son, I believe; and rich, no doubt—lucky dog!’

‘What is that to me? They are only dear old friends of long ago——’

‘Only! Is that all, are you sure? Ah, Pleasance, Pleasance, you were not so ready to let me call you by that dear name; but

then *I* am—a genteel pauper ! So society would say, at least.'

He looked away with such a thoroughly miserable expression, that in the tenderness of my heart, being still a mere child in such experience, it pained me almost as much as himself to see him suffer. In my eager impulsiveness to comfort him, I hotly explained :

‘ Listen, Clair ! you are altogether wrong. Mrs. Gladman is my godmother—and John Gladman, and Bob and I, were all three of us together down near Dartmoor at their home. Oh ! it is years and years ago ; it must be three or four years. That is all.’

St. Leger looked at me softly, as if intensely relieved ; and then, despite some protesting efforts on my part, possessed himself gently of my hand ; and keeping, caressed it.

‘ Dear little hand ! . . . Then he is not my

favoured rival *yet*? Ah, Pleasance, if only I dared hope that no one else would be; though I am a selfish brute to wish it,' he murmured lovingly. My brain seemed on fire: I did not understand him. *Surely*, he felt strongly! Yet he spoke of what seemed death or life to me—and of his own love and misery—always in the same light-touching tone of graceful joy or gentle regret.

'He will never be your rival, unless *you* wish it!' burst unawares from my lips. Then I did not know how I could have said such a thing; scarcely knew indeed what I myself really meant.

'Never! . . promise me that, Pleasance! So you do really care for me, after all, darling—my own darling,' exclaimed Clair, with a sudden excitement which he had hitherto kept well in hand.

And then the memory of the Wishing-Stile last summer seemed to steal over us. Clair's arm drew softly round me once more; and for some little time 'the beating of' our two hearts 'was all the sound' we heard. When at last my lover spoke again it was to bewail his lot. All that was in his heart was uttered! . . . He was passionately in love with me—and yet—and yet—it was with intense self-pity, and towards me lamenting fondness.

'I am the most miserable wretch alive! If only I dared ask you to have me, Pleasance; but it would be downright folly at present. . . I could not do it, as things stand. Ah! if only I were like that fellow Gladman; well-off, and with no cares or trouble. It is a wretched world! . . . Why have such good-natured boobies always the best of it in life?'

‘ You are wrong. John Gladman is little, if at all, better-off than yourself,’ my tremulous lips framed with difficulty; ‘only he is *content with what he has!*’

‘ Yes, yes: any man is rich, I suppose, who has next to no wants. But, Pleasance, dearest, is it my fault that since I was a mere boy I have been thrown into society, where I *may say*’ (with graceful deprecation) ‘ I am a favourite? And now all the extravagant habits one learns from the fruit of the tree of knowledge have become my second nature. What is it? . . . don’t move! You shall not go away. No, no, you are fast held; I defy you to leave me now. And—and, look here, my own Pleasance, I am ashamed of being such an idle drone. I must work—I will work! As soon as this winter’s shooting is over, I will *really* try and get something to do.

Besides, you would not have me miss the party at Broadhams, for you and I are to meet there again' (playfully). 'So now, you are more willing to stay with me, my white angel. What tyrants some women are ! and fond of making us slaves, aren't they ?'

It was true, those last words had made me *more* willing to stay. Willing!—as if my heart was not all too traitorously willing ; whilst pride and discretion kept tormenting me for having so fallen away from my old allegiance, whispering that it was all wrong and foolish—the self-lowering of my womanhood—to have so let this man gain assurance of my love from my own lips, and yet to be no more to him than before.

Yet what could I say—never tell him how gladly I would marry him, poor as he was. Why! . . he did not *want* to know it!

And till now, how could I have found inward strength to send him away, believing in his true attachment as I had—as I did! —But now I really felt again a frightened child; bewildered by new problems, new views of life, in which this my lover alone offered himself to my troubled mind as philosopher, confidant, and guide?

So I was wretched in my happiness, yet in pride could not reveal it. Ah! still trustful of Clair, though troubled; mortified, yet proud of his love. It was all like a heavy, sweet dream—of which one knew the wakening must be bitter disappointment, so would not break the soft-entralling spell. Nothing was real but the present; the future a chaos of doubt—a quicksand of hope. My lips smiled in fond trembling at Clair St. Leger, lovingly obeying the unspoken command of

his smile ; yet I gazed past his dear head miserable-eyed. Since summer to have hoped so much—to have so longed for this meeting, day and night, and night and day ; and now, what had come of it ? With hope deferred till December again, my heart was sick.

All I vaguely knew was, that Clair was trying to explain his affairs to me. But indeed these seemed so involved to himself, no wonder they confused me. He once had good interest,—had been offered very fair openings in life, in his first youth, so he said ; but in boyish love of his liberty refused them all, thinking *then* he had enough to live on and enjoy himself. Would there still be a chance for him in this or that line of life, he wondered ? There might ; or might not. Then there were other things ; but these required examinations—and whether such a lazy block-

head as he was could now acquire the knowledge necessary in most situations?—*there* was the question!

All this I vaguely heard him say, perceiving with woman's instinct that he did really love me; yet that he had a deadly hatred of the idea of work, as work. It made me sorry for him, and half-ashamed that I should so wish him to drudge, to fetter his free, merry life for my sake; yet I did wish it!

And so at last out of this whirlpool of loves, doubts, and fears this only rose clear to surface, that Clair—for my sake!—would not ask me to engage myself to him; but trusted in my assurance that no one else should have ‘his place;’ next we were to meet at Broadhams and—be happy. In the mean while he declared with a sigh he must, and would indeed, look out for work in earnest.

Suddenly we started and drew apart, aware of an unusually firm footfall approaching. It was Mr. Bracy.

To this day I cannot guess, well as I later came to know him, whether he wished to warn us or not. He was a man whose firm-set face and close-locked large mind could hold many secrets large and small, but would betray none.

All he said was, in a pleasant voice, ‘I am really sorry to ask you to come back to the hot ball-room, Miss Brown ; for you must be glad of a few moments’ rest, after all your exertions to make us all enjoy ourselves. But this dance is mine—and what is more important to you, no doubt, your mother has been looking for you.’

At that, I started with a guilty feeling.
‘ My mother ! Did she ?—Did she ask you to find me ? ’

'No. I only happened to overhear her asking others. So, thinking I had seen you come in this direction, I came to search on my own account; hoping you would forgive me, if you are tired and would rather stay here.'

'Oh no—yes! I mean I am *very* glad you came—that is' (seeing that as we went away he looked amused, but dubious), 'I should have been very sorry if you had not.'

Even as we approached the dancing-hall, we heard the last bars of the music dying away. How I had forgotten time in that far-away green fernery! But Bracy would listen to none of my hesitating apologies; putting them aside as an ancient man might those of a mere child.

'Stay, and let me look at these pictures in the inner hall—I am quite glad of an

opportunity,' he said. 'Ah yes! these four, dear, old ancestors of mine! They seem to look at me again with quite friendly recognizing eyes. See, Lady Betty there, by Kneller; now that you are grown tall, and in your white dress to-night, I believe you have a resemblance to her; why, yes, you have.'

'That is too flattering, Mr. Bracy; but it sounds unlucky, she died so young.'

'And in the height of her happiness; better that than to have waited for the sorrows of life, Miss Pleasance—may I call you that, for old acquaintance' sake?—it always seemed to me such a pretty name that it is a pity to hide it in Miss Brown.'

He was still eying the four, beautiful, full-length portraits around, with such wistful looks, though trying to talk lightly to me, that I exclaimed with all the sympathy of voice

for the Mr. Fulke of former days which had till now been pent-up in my heart :

‘What a shame it seems for us to have them here!—And what a pity you did not take them away with you, when you had to leave the dear old house!’

‘They are fixtures in the wainscot and could not well be removed; besides, where could I find room for them in my bachelor’s crib? It would be a worse puzzle than the Vicar of Wakefield’s family panorama,’ he laughed, looking with renewed interest down in my face. Then he added: ‘Thank you for your kind fellow-feeling all the same! It has done me good; though I hope you are the only person here to-night who knows, or fancies, I have any regrets for the past.’

‘But I may be really sorry for you, as we

are old friends ; indeed you must allow me, for I *am* so sorry,' I timidly entreated, though pressing the point. For where an old friend is poor and proud, one must insist sometimes on giving sympathy.

Bracy quickly put one hand a moment lightly on mine which lay on his arm. 'The same good heart as when you were a child ! . . . If even we never meet again,—yes, Miss Pleasance, I shall be very glad if you will still think of me as an old friend.'

As he ended, an ebb-tide of departing guests flowed out into the inner hall, where we were. Seeing Fulke Bracy with me, one and all came up especially to shake him by the hand. It was, 'My dear Fulke,' —all round—'When are you coming back to these parts ? . . . and next time will you stay with *me*?—And with us !—And with us ! He

could hardly answer them all. His arm was nearly worked out of its socket by the friendly old Squires, and his hand continually being held in warm, prolonged clasps by the Squiresses. Clearly Fulke Bracy had been the lion of the evening ; the one man about whom all would talk to-morrow morning over a yawning breakfast-table.

Father was standing in the far doorway, watching it all with the kindest of smiles. Half the guests seemed to forget *the host* in their warm adieux to the former owner of Stoke ; but, if my father knew that, he only noticed it by an amused smile.

It gladdened me to the heart to see his unselfishness, when a little dash of cold water seemed thrown on my mind by hearing Beau's voice say in low disgust behind me :

'Horribly bad taste I call it of Bee, bringing that fellow here to-night, as if to make the county look upon us as *parvenus*.'

'I *wish* she had not, certainly, my dear,' murmured mother's voice in answer. Upon looking round I found both behind me in a doorway; and mother's lips were slightly tight-pressed as if the scene was one of secret mortification to her, though father smiled so utterly free of guile or envy.

My mother beckoned me quietly to her side. 'So you were with Mr. Bracy, dear; stay here now—the duchess is just going away.'

The duchess and grand-aunt Bee were indeed engaged in making those farewells to their friends which mean, in each case, a ten minutes' postscript talk after the first good-bye; but at last they disengaged them-

selves. The great lady said now several amiable nothings to mother, who smiled her still answers, more stilly and sweetly than usual. Mrs. Gladman also came, and kissing me warmly, was to my surprise very affectionately greeted by my mother; as was John. Fulke Bracy received only her most frigid politeness, though I gave him a furtive look and hand-grasp that he answered in kind.

‘God bless you all! for it has been a great success;’ uttered Bee devoutly in a loud whisper, stopping behind a moment, and adding, ‘But I think *my* man was the hero of the evening. Pleasance, child, I expect you to be in love with him.’

My mother’s brows contracted in dignified disapproval; Beau looked black.

‘Well, if she isn’t, I am,’ exclaimed Alice

gaily in the background, ‘and he danced with me half the evening.’

‘Yes; I think he asked you rather too often. He was not afflicted with shyness, evidently,’ thickly observed Sir Dudley, still further in the rear.

‘My good old man, why should he be?’ laughed Lady Digges. ‘Why, I told him there was nobody else I cared half as much to dance with!—could I have said more?’

‘Well, no; I don’t suppose so, though upon my soul I believe you are capable of anything,’ heavily returned her spouse.

‘And I have invited him warmly to Broadhams this winter,’ ended her Ladyship triumphantly. Several of us looked at her in misgiving, but there was no lowering of a storm on Sir Dudley’s brow. She was so pretty; and still ruled him, by that and

her childish *entrain*, as entirely as in the days before marriage.

So all ended well; and not a departing guest but assured us again and again that it had been a most delightful ball. Our own feelings on the subject were mixed; but in general disposed to accept the soft flattery with self-gratification and to quench misgivings. It often is so with the givers of a feast.

CHAPTER II.

OUR guests mostly all left us on the day after the ball; all the young men at least, since Beau would not—and Bob, poor fellow, could not—stay with us longer to entertain them. So Clair St. Leger said good-bye, and till nearly December I should see him no more.

Aunt Bee was reported to have still kept on the Gladmans and Mr. Bracy for a few days; but my mother gently put so many soft objections in the way of father's proposal, which had been warmly seconded by Alice, that we should drive over to see them, that

the plan dropped. The only one of us from Stoke who was determined to see its former owner, and sturdily carried his point, was old Joe Verity our gardener. He walked over and back the full twenty miles' distance in his Sunday boots, and was footsore for two days afterwards. My mother gently chid him, for not having waited on the chance of finding some neighbour's spring-cart going that way; reminding him he was not so young or strong as he had been.

'Just so, ma'am,' said the faithful old man. 'I thought if I missed seeing Mr. Fulke now, I'd never see him younger;' and he shut up his mouth thereupon, with a reticent but self-satisfied expression.

At last the time came when Rose and I were to set off on our visit to Broadhams; for my father and mother only meant to

spend a few days there, and then to bring us home with them.

During all the days since our ball, I only seemed to have been waiting and looking forward, almost *living forward!* It was a strange feeling, for hitherto I had always enjoyed my daily life more or less gladly ; or at least, if any disagreeable days came, there was unfailing hope with the morrow. But now, nothing in this daily round seemed worth existing for. My whole soul was as if projected forward into the coming time. Days, even hours, seemed either wearily blank, or a heavy span to be perforce dragged through ; my usual occupations burdensome, or a shadowy dream. But at last, as I said, we had packed up all our best dresses, and—speaking for myself—having hardly slept the night before, were off on our journey to one

of the flattest and fattest of the midland shires.

‘Of course Alice will come to meet us at the station,’ said Rose with bright expectation, as we drew near our goal.

Alice, to her, was still ‘our eldest sister,’ whose pet she had especially been, rather than Lady Diggles, the admired mistress of one of the greatest houses in the country.

‘I hardly think she will,’ said I doubtfully.

‘Why, Pleasance! how can you say so? Would not we go to meet *her*? You have got into a moping way of looking at things lately; what is the matter with you? Father remarked it the other day, though mother told him it was all nonsense—he thought you were not well.’

The blood stirred within me at that; and I moved uneasily to look out of the window.

Moping ! I should be so ashamed to be thought moping after Clair ! and oh ! I had been trying so hard to be as pleasant and cheerful, to outward appearances, as ever.

At the station an enormous but empty family omnibus awaited us ; no Alice. The Diggles footmen were powdered, ours were not ; the first slight sign of the difference in our respective households. On our drive I praiseworthy forbore to observe on my superior prescience, as Rose half-indignantly began inventing excuses for Alice. Between times she kept flattening her nose against the window, declaring the country the ugliest she had ever seen,—dreary straight roads with hedges like dead-wood walls hiding all prospect—save where an occasional gate showed a glimpse of great sodden pastures, or turnip-fields stretching to the dull grey horizon.

'I should *hate* to live here; shouldn't you!' she exclaimed. Then, after ten seconds, 'Why it is no more to be compared even to the country round Stoke—'

'To Stoke! I should think not,' was my jealous interruption. 'None of us need ever think, if we marry, to have such another home as Stoke.' I was disappointed too, like Rose; but not on account of Alice. It had been a half-hope in my mind that some one else might have come down in the same train with us. When was Clair coming? or could he—not be coming?

He had written to me, that he would try to be at Broadhams at the same time as ourselves; for, it must be owned, we had exchanged one or two letters since we parted. Very few—pride, or shyness, or both, had prevented my writing oftener.

Presently, after being well wearied of the landscape, we drove through a great castellated archway, the gates opening mysteriously as of their own accord. No laughing children peeped past the solemnly drawn blinds of the lodges, on either side; not a flower, shrub, or creeper broke the dead monotony of their walls or the sweep of grey gravel.

Then came a long damp drive, bordered by iron palings, through a wide, flat park that looked to us dull as desolation. Yet winter-time at Broadhams meant that then the great flat-roofed palace was at its best; itself full of guests, and the coverts of pheasants. In summer the park was hot and ugly, with its solemn standard trees dotted too far apart for any shade, but to a few fat deer that looked dull and respectable like all else here. The square great house seemed geometrically

set down in the very midst of this park ; and by some whim not a rhododendron clump, no shrub, nor flower, had been permitted to invade the dead green of the surrounding turf for a considerable distance.

From a quarter of a mile away on each side, one could see every figure that went in or out of the house. A broad gravel walk surrounded it, with such painful greyness, to my eye, that any weed would have been a relief ; while dead-looking, greenish glass windows inserted here and there by the path's edge, made one sorry for the servants down in the dim-lit basement.

The house-stables, as unsightly buildings, were discreetly hidden out of sight in a great mass of shrubbery a quarter of a mile away ; and all menial communication with the house was carried on by means of an underground

passage. As to the home farm, it was a good morning's walk distant. For all its cheerful animal sounds and sights had been presumably thought too entirely vulgar by the heavy Georgian minds of whatever Sir Dudley Digges had planned Broadhams to his liking.

As we drove up and were ushered into a Plutonian stone hall, meant only for cold and coats, gloves, hats, and such small gear, we looked forward expectantly ; but no smiling Alice appeared among her many tall, properly proportioned and powdered servants. In a vast inner marble hall warmed by four fires, and surrounded by statues, above which ran a round gallery, we looked around once more—as the chief of these splendid domestics paused.

‘ Her Ladyship is out driving in her pony-carriage, with Mr. Bracy,’ he suavely ex-

plained, as if sorry for our evident and indeed murmured disappointment ; then respectfully inquired would we prefer to be shown at once to our rooms, or to go into the morning-room. He believed Mrs. Jessop was there.

‘Mrs. Jessop, who is she ?’ muttered Rose to me half crossly, being tired and cold.

‘The widowed Mrs. Jessop,—her Ladyship’s friend,’ blandly reiterated our obsequious vice-host, evidently pitying our profound social ignorance ; ‘and I believe Mr. St. Leger is in the morning-room also.’

‘Let us go up-stairs first and take off our wraps,’ declared Rose at that, not caring a fig whether she saw Clair St. Leger an hour hence, or not. But I, trying to steady my voice from any undue hurry, interposed.

‘We can go up-stairs very soon, dear, when

our luggage has been taken up, you know ; but we may as well just get warm [in the morning-room first.]'

So it was done ; for when I rarely *did* decide on anything, my own way was curiously always given me. We went down a wide, carpeted and sofa-lined corridor, warmed to a hot-house temperature with hot air—one leaf of double mahogany doors, lofty enough for giants, was noiselessly opened. We passed round a heavy Chinese screen, placed to exclude all possible but improbable draughts in such a hermetically tight-closed, snugly kept, British household. A square, heavily-furnished room opened before us, giving an impression, before my senses could rightly discern separate objects, of long-established dull wealth. . .

But all I knew was, and not even this clearly—that, just out of the direct heat of

an enormous fire, sat a high-complexioned, black-haired woman in a deep arm-chair. And on the fender-stool exactly at her feet, basking enjoyably in the fire-glow—and it seemed likewise in the glances of her bright black eyes, from the way his own blue ones seemed looking up in them—his handsome head almost on a level with her knees, sat Clair St. Leger, my lover.

We had come in so softly on the three-piled carpet, they had not heard us.

CHAPTER III.

ROSE and I did not stay long down-stairs.

We were now in our two vast bed-rooms, opening one out of the other for companionship's sake, presumably; nevertheless, as Rose called from far away out of the cavernous depths of her state apartment, it required a day's march for us to visit each other. It was a chilly walk, certainly, between the fireplace and the dressing-table at one distant window, and the wash-stand at the other. Clearly, the advantages Alice enjoyed as mistress of Broadhams were not as yet appreciated by my younger sister.

I hardly knew, however, what Rose was

saying. I had heavily taken off my wraps and bonnet, and let them fall rather than put them on the huge bed, like unto that of Ware. Then I came over to the fire, walking in a dream. There, leaning on the mantelpiece with my head bowed on my hands, I stood lost in heavy thought. *What* was wrong? *Was* anything wrong?

Thus Rose found me—as she came in after singing cheerily to herself in her own room, as blithely but as unmusically, to own the truth, as a sparrow's chirp; whilst pretending to help our maid to unpack, but in reality being helped by the latter every three seconds in the easy task of tidying her appearance before five o'clock tea-time.

'What! not ready yet; why, how you have been dawdling!' she exclaimed with sisterly honesty. 'Your hair is all rough,

and you look as if the journey had made you ill. A nice sight you'll be to come downstairs. My dear Pleasance!—let me help you.'

And this barely eighteen-year-old Rose flew to set me to rights, with the protecting air of a wisely superior caretaker.

'No—? Do I look hideous?' I asked nervously, hastening to study the glass; a movement which made Rose, who was pinning some lace down at the back of my neck, follow me in a run, inflicting small stabs and apologizing all the way. My face was certainly almost colourless—except for my lips, that from nervous pressing together and perhaps having been unconsciously bitten, were blood-red; while my eyes looked drearily brown without a spark of light in them, and were larger than usual, with rings darkly defined underneath.

' Well ; you certainly have not got as fine a complexion as Mrs. Jessop down-stairs. Don't stand too near her, or she'll put you in the shade,' laughed my easy little sister, not knowing she was giving a worse dagger-thrust to my heart than those of the pin to my body, adding, ' How nice and friendly she seemed, from the way she shook hands with us.'

' Oh, very—and offered to get us lunch and everything, as if we could not ask for what we wanted in our own sister's house. She seemed certainly to consider us the strangers, and to be quite at home herself,' I replied, with unconscious bitterness.

Rose looked up in utter surprise.

' Why—you must be ill, Pleasance. I never knew you speak like that before.'

At this moment, Alice burst into the room.

'Oh, my dears, I'm frozen alive with the cold!' was her first greeting, uttered with a radiant face and preoccupied air, showing she had enjoyed her drive. 'So you've come!—I'm so glad'—lightly embracing us both. 'But now, come to *my* rooms. I haven't a moment to spare before putting on my new tea-gown, and as Lady Pawlett always wears smart ones I want to cut her out to-night. Pleasance not ready, do you say, Rose? Oh nonsense, she'll do well enough, and she never minds—do you, dear? Come—come!'

Away she swept us to her suite of rooms! rapidly explaining on the way that these had been settled according to her own taste—the rest of the house being *too* hideous! But Sir Dudley was still obstinate about changes there. 'However in time, my dears; we'll

see—in time ! Oh, I mean to have my own way.' Her rooms indeed were charming. A Watteau-like nutshell of a boudoir all hung in ruby watered silk, with exquisite china crowded everywhere ; fairy-like furniture ; all kinds of most cunning and newest knick-knacks. We cried out in admiration, and would have stayed to examine it more closely, but Alice hurried us on to her dressing-room. This in its own way was equally delightful, with crystal and marble shrines fit for Venus rising from the Paphian waves ; while the magnificent silver-mirrored and ivory inlaid dressing-table was covered with such treasures as Belinda's attendant sprites would have joyed to guard.

'That is a new gown—not one of your trousseau ones,' uttered Rose, examining with sharp eyes the exquisite garment which

Alice's maid was rapidly preparing to put on her.

'Yes, I had to get a whole new set in Paris ; those mother would choose me looked so plain,' laughed Alice. 'Half my next year's allowance is gone beforehand already. No matter ; I'll just have to coax my old man for more. Well—and how do you like Jenny Jessop, my great friend ? I met her for the first time a month ago, when we were visiting in Hampshire, and she certainly *is* the best company in the world.'

'Has she been long a widow ? Is she—well-off ?' I slowly asked, not quite owning to myself why I put those questions.

'Long ? No ! she got out of weeds as soon as decency permitted ; and you may be very sure she will bear her single affliction not a minute longer than she can well help it.' So

saying lightly—and ignoring the latter part of my sentence, which I had not courage to repeat—Lady Digges hurried us down-stairs. On the way she enumerated the names of her guests, of whom it seemed a large party had just come in after having gone, to please Sir Dudley, for a dull, cold drive on his coach. But I knew none of them, excepting the Pawletts and Mr. Bracy. As to the latter, I said in a heavy, surprised way, ‘I am quite astonished that you really have asked him here. Of course, you told us all how much you liked him at our ball; but still you only knew him that one night, so—’

‘Just so, my dear,’ nodded my sister with an arch smile, and pausing with her hand on the drawing-room door-handle to half whisper to us. ‘Poor old Dudley absolutely was foolish enough to grumble at my having

danced so much with Mr. Bracy at Stoke. So as I intend to nip all such little jealousies in the bud, I never rested till I got him here. Heavens and earth ! but it was a trouble ; it cost me more letters to bring that man than nearly all the rest put together.'

Knowing Alice's weakness for exaggeration in such small matters, I took this last statement for what it might be worth ; and as she rustled with charming grace to join her assembled friends, I followed quietly, feeling like a blot on her brightness—though Rose behind our dear fashionable beauty looked a fresh country rose-bud.

We found ourselves in a different room. A narrow drawing-room heavily draped in gorgeous yellow, its great length broken by pillars and separate fireplaces, its walls almost covered with full-length Digges portraits.

Being rather superstitious in small things, I was grateful for the change of scene from the morning-room ; as if therewith might come a change of circumstances for myself. It proved so indeed.

There was a large, laughing group at the far fire-place as we entered, among whom was Clair ; also Mrs. Jessop. She, like Alice and several others, had changed her dress for a violet and gold tea-gown ; which might have seemed loud, if she had not volubly assured every one it was half-mourning. Mr. Bracy was the first to recognize and shake hands with me, but he was immediately called away by Alice.

After I had been shyly but warmly greeted by poor Amy Pawlett, and received a brusque hand-clasp from Charlotte, they were also both immediatey wanted by Alice to do the

honours of the tea-table, which she herself found too much trouble.

‘Now that your sisters are here, won’t you give them that post of honour, my dear?’ whispered Mrs. Jessop audibly, for my benefit, with what she meant to be a very conciliatory glance at myself.

‘Oh, dear no! my sisters will want to amuse themselves as well as the rest of us, and Lady Pawlett likes those two girls to be made useful,’ was the merry reply.

Amuse ourselves! Yes, every one else seemed to be doing that around me. Not one but myself seemed to have the least shadow of secret care on their hearts. With the tinkling of tea-cups mingled eager chat; and the rippling of laughter came as continuously as that of little waves on a beach. The very atmosphere seemed to convey the *aura* of

their careless mirth from their minds to mine. But I, feeling myself—just poor Pleasance Brown—plain and disregarded once more, sat withdrawn somewhat in shadow, my eyes only trying to watch unobserved one figure there, being too strained and anxious to *amuse* myself.

At last Clair looked round searchingly and came straight towards me; though with his usual air of gay carelessness.

‘Why are you hiding yourself here?’ he asked, scanning me with blue, wide-opened eyes, and a merry smile; whilst all my own imperfections of pallor and careless attire seemed to myself surely frightfully evident.

‘I am a little tired, and had rather a headache after our journey,’ was my answer, almost apologetic in its lowness; and yet an

apology was surely not necessary on *my* side.

‘Yes; I thought by the very first glance I had, that you did not seem quite yourself on arriving this afternoon,’ and so saying Clair sat down and played with an Indian puzzle that lay on a table between us. His tone was now peculiar, forced, and might mean reproach, that I had already misjudged him in haste—(for indeed the situation in which I had found him was mayhap harmless enough!) —or it perhaps signified embarrassment. I only replied, however,

‘Can you be much surprised at that?’

At this moment, Fulke Bracy came up to me with tea. ‘I saw you had been forgotten, and you must need some refreshment,’ he said. Clair exclaimed at his own remissness in not thinking of my wants. Then the short

interruption over, as Bracy left us, he quickly bent his head and murmured, ‘Don’t you think after this, that you might very well be supposed to be taking some rest up-stairs after your journey. Do you know the round gallery over the hall? No?—Well, if you don’t mind waiting . . . That won’t please you, however; you would rather be waited for, I know, so you will find me presently at the head of the staircase, and I will show you the gallery. . . Don’t keep me too long, before you come; that’s all.’

He was gone from my side before I could make any inquiry or answer, and had sauntered out of the room with a most un-preoccupied air. What did he mean? Tired, troubled, I felt anxious and half-ashamed at the idea of a clandestine meeting; and that too so hurriedly after our arrival.

Why could not Clair have stayed here beside me on the sofa, and said all he wished—and that I should be so glad to hear—quite unheard, and most likely unheeded, by the others in this large room?

But his will was too much my law ; the temptation too strong. So I found myself going alone, presently, up the great dimly-lit stairs, though with slow dignified steps that sank inaudibly into the thickness of the carpet. On reaching the head of the staircase not a soul was to be seen ; and perfect silence reigned through the long picture-hung corridors before me.

CHAPTER IV.

HALF indignant, yet almost relieved, I stood to give one hurried searching glance along the warmly-red perspective of the broad passage ; to see that no figure could be inspecting one of the many cases of stuffed birds, butterflies, beetles, and what Rose called ‘stones,’ that were placed museum-like down its length. No one !

Why, I hardly knew—but, with a sudden impulse, I darted like a loosed arrow towards the heavy baize doors that led to the sacred precincts of the young ladies’ wing—the rooms on either side of this great corridor, I was in,

being given to the chiefest and married guests. But before I had vanished away to the safety of my own room, a detaining hand was lightly laid on my shoulder, and a laughing voice said in my ear,

‘Why such haste, fair and faithless female?
The round gallery is not *there!*’

‘Where were you? I did not see you,’ was my almost unwilling reply.

Clair pointed with a smile to the curtains of a near window in the recess, behind which he must have been concealed.

‘It was worth hiding to see your “fair face blushing with sweet surprise” at my supposed rudeness. What a hurry you were in to display your dignity! This way, and—please don’t run away again.’

Pushing a swing-door that opened noiselessly, we entered a round, shadowy gallery,

looking down on the softly-lit marble hall ; the coloured glass dome of which was over our heads. Three other doors led to different quarters of the house. Yet, as Clair explained in a quick whisper, being surrounded by corridors, the gallery was not very often used as a passage-way ; although being considered a lounge in the heart of the house, our presence there was not remarkable.

Cushioned niches offered seats perfectly hidden, in the dim light up here, from any one crossing the hall below. But with us, any person was easily reconnoitred if coming from the drawing-rooms, billiard-room, or any of the reception-rooms below, since they must needs cross this central hall, on which even the tapping of the lightest woman's heel made sonorous echoes.

Now that we were alone together, Clair's outbursts of devotion on seeing me again, were enough to allay all my fears on first entering the house. There was no doubt now in my mind of his fondness for me—none! Yet I was still ill at ease and nervous. What was the matter with me? St. Leger asked twice with reproachful gaiety; for he certainly had to guess at rather than elicit the answering words of gladness that stood mute on my lips. Ah! could he not guess how differently we seemed to have passed the intervening time since our last meeting at Stoke?—I in anxiety and waiting, that now made me as timid and fearful as he was light-hearted and thoughtless of the future.

A few brief minutes had barely passed away when the feeling of shame lest any one

should surprise us, which had been on me from the first, so grew that, suddenly making a movement to rise, I said, ‘I must go now—I told Alice I was going to my own room.’

‘What! So soon! when I have hardly seen you. Nonsense; it is not to be permitted,’ and he caught me by both hands laughingly, for he was sitting beside me in the recess, exclaiming, ‘There. I dare you to go now.’

‘But please! *please!* indeed I would rather go. What would any one say if——?’

At that instant footsteps were distinctly audible crossing the hall below. At once I started up, but as quickly sat down again; remembering I was otherwise likely to be seen; almost trembling with new fright. Oh, if Clair did but understand that this secresy,

if sweet to him, was equally painful to me !
And if he only wished so, there need be no
necessity for it.

‘ Why are you afraid ? It is only Bracy,’
whispered Clair, peering cautiously down.
‘ He is an awfully good fellow ; isn’t he ? “ If
he comes here ”—do you say ? Oh no ; I’ve
never known him cross this gallery before.
What a capital meeting-place it is, to be
sure. I defy our natural enemies, chaperons,
to discover whoever has got first into this
watch-tower.’

‘ You seem to know it very well ! ’

How the quick jealousy leapt out, I do not
know—after my thinking it was all buried,
too—but something familiar in his tone may
have jarred on my almost overstrung, sensitive
nerves. Without reason, or logic, women
sometimes seem to possess a gift of divining

the truth. My chance shaft must have struck home; for Clair looked up, then at once dropped his gaze, with a slightly nettled, colder air.

‘ Why—what ?—what do you mean, Pleasance ? This is the second time this afternoon you have made me fancy you were displeased at something. I cannot imagine what.’

Before I could answer—though indeed in my trouble it was unlikely that any clear answer could have come—one of the four swing-doors opened. And as my prophetic soul had too truly foretold, Fulke Bracy came into the gallery.

‘ Hallo !—what brings him ?’ muttered Clair in a disgusted undertone, rising at once. I had sprung to my feet on the first opening of the door, and now assumed a careless attitude leaning on the rail. For a moment

Mr. Bracy appeared not to have perceived us, and to be passing on the other side; but then, retracing his steps, he came and said pleasantly, but I fancied significantly,

‘ Oh, St. Leger, I believe the ladies downstairs are sending messages round the house for you. They have started the idea of having a paper-chase (of all things in the world!) through the passages, and want you to be the hare. Will you come ? ’

‘ Will I ? —of course ! Is this the latest brilliant thought of the fair Jessop ? ’ answered Clair at once, with an alacrity which—though I knew how really disgusted he had been a minute ago at the interruption—none the less startled me by its apparent sincerity. I was unused yet to such little deceits ; and never did get used to them for the matter of that.

A door below now opened, letting forth a flood of feminine voices, laughter, and the rustling of skirts. As the sound came nearer beneath the gallery, I looked hastily round for some means of escape.

‘ You don’t want to join them, perhaps ? ’ said Bracy quickly, who had been watching me. ‘ You are tired after travelling ; I thought you would be so. This way then, before you are seized on. This door leads you directly into the young ladies’ gallery.’

So saying, he showed me an opposite door to that by which we had entered, whilst Clair rather slowly turned away. And as I sped into the safety of our own passage with a sense of some thankfulness, if of confusion, it was Fulke Bracy who quickly closed the door again behind my flying footsteps, ably covering my retreat.

CHAPTER V.

THE fun was fast and furious at Broad-hams that evening.

Most of the guests had only preceded us by a day or two, but had already worn off any first stiffness, or doubt as to what manners or customs might best please the reigning spirit in the house. Besides, several of them—of whom were Mrs. Jessop and Clair St. Leger—had already met Alice at other houses in the winter. Then jokes had been made that were now perpetuated into secret passwords; a shibboleth to the uninitiated like myself; and fun had begun in the germ

that was to grow to its utmost riot at Broadhams.

Rose came up-stairs, astonished and glowing with her account of the mad paper-chase. The trail had been carried, to the house-keeper's desperation, through all the stately-kept passages, excepting those near Sir Dudley's study ; till finally Clair St. Leger had been run to earth in a bath-room, from which it was impossible to dislodge him, he had so fortified himself behind an army of water jugs, which he threatened to discharge at his assailants.

‘ But—I must tell you, Pleasance dear ! I do hope your headache is better ; for Alice is quite vexed with you for not coming, too. She whispered to me that she hoped you were not going to play the prude, as it was quite enough to have the Pawlett girls

looking prim. Oh, and you are not to let Sir Dudley know by any chance!—Fancy, Lady Pawlett was first and foremost in the fun with us all!'

Acting on Rose's hint, I tried to put away all traces of heaviness of spirit; as also, to make a better impression, I dressed myself in one of my prettiest gowns.

Down-stairs came my reward; for as I looked round at all the other ladies, especially at Mrs. Jessop, who was beautifully dressed in black and yellow, thinking they must surely outshine me, Amy Pawlett came up and said bluntly,

'How nice you look, Pleasance.'

'What a surprising fact!' observed St. Leger sarcastically; and, 'Is that anything so very unusual, Miss Pawlett?' said Mr. Bracy, both at the same moment, as they were

standing by. But then with a pleasant smile of making way, Bracy, who was at my side, moved away; and Clair at once took advantage of the opportunity to say in a hurried undertone,

‘Do you know that all the ladies are to choose who is to take them in to dinner to-night? Look—they are all telling Lady Digges now.’ There was indeed a laughing group surrounding Alice, round which again stood a black outer wall of manhood, waiting to be chosen with a more or less of ‘don’t-care-if-I’m-not’ air of bravery, and smiles. ‘I don’t know, of course, whether you want any one else; but if not you might as well ask for me,’ continued Clair, just raising his eyes in pleading sweetness.

‘Go and ask for you before them all? . . . It is a dreadful idea!’ I answered, hesitating.

‘ Quick ; or it will be too late ; and I want to have you to myself this first evening. All the rest can do it, so why not—ah ! there—’

At that moment, Mrs. Jessop, detaching herself from the group, made a little triumphant signal to Clair, her black eyes dancing and a smile of merry conquest on her lips. She was no doubt much older than himself ; but still she looked a comely woman, this rival of mine—as my heart misgave me she was.

‘ You are my property, so don’t try to run away,’ she exclaimed.

‘ Who would do so, even if they could, Mrs. Jessop,’ replied St. Leger, with a bow and smile that *I* should have thought mocking ; but she seemed fully satisfied. And now, to my surprise, a broad, rather round-shouldered figure came towards me from a group of gentlemen with a slightly rolling

gait, and John Gladman, for it was he, said, smiling broadly,

‘ How d’ye do, Miss Pleasance. I say, haven’t you chosen anybody yet at this game? No; well I’m awfully glad, for you might give an old friend a chance. Nobody else will have me, I don’t think.’

‘ You don’t recommend yourself very well,’ I answered, smiling, but sadly; as Clair with vexation in his heart against my slackness moved slowly towards his widow.

‘ Oh, I don’t say but that some of them might have me; the Pawletts, for instance; but they’re not of much account,’ went on the young man confidentially. ‘ And there is a jolly-looking little sister of yours, too, though I hardly know her.’

‘ Rose: would you like to ask her?’ I answered in a state of absence of mind,

turning my neck, which was luckily as flexible as it was long, to see if Mr. Bracy, who was standing still aside, behind me, was unclaimed. For John Gladman was well enough ; but my old friend was better.

But John was not to be treated thus, and moving steadily round in front of me, explained with a sort of good-humoured exasperation at my supposed stupidity :

‘Don’t you understand what I tell you, that *I* can’t choose a lady to-night ! And if even I could, it would be you, not your sister. It was you my mother told me I was to be sure and ask to dance always, and—’ The sentence ended in a sound of confusion, but picking himself up gallantly John went on : ‘ You know she’s so awfully fond of you, she’d like me to do you any little good turn I could, you know.’

‘Dear, good Mrs. Gladman ! how sweet of her to have remembered me all this time.’ And, so saying, I lifted my eyes unconsciously to John’s face, whilst they were alight with a gleam of gratitude and love meant altogether for her—not for him.

‘Well, yes ; she is a dear good soul, isn’t she ? There are not many women in this world like my mother ! . . . And as you’ve always been a favourite of hers, she’d like you and me to be great chums. Don’t you see—?’

‘Of course !—Yes,’ I said, somewhat confused. For at that moment Alice bore gaily down upon us, while at the same time Mr. Bracy approached me too. If still a wandering knight, that distressed damsel *me* would so gladly choose him as my gallant, instead of this poor John.

‘Now Pleasance ! Pleasance ! you deserve a

shaking for not coming like the rest of us to choose your cavalier,' cried my sister. 'So, as there is only Hobson's choice left, you had better make *it* with a good grace.'

'But I shall be very glad, indeed, if I may have—' I murmured, forgetting what the famous choice meant between the horse you could hire and—none other! Thereupon my shy glance met Fulke Bracy's kindly eyes, that answered mine with friendly light.

'You can't have Mr. Bracy,' if you mean that, interposed Alice. 'For, as this is one of the few occasions on which the lady of the house can be taken in by you, sir—I claim you for my own self.' Turning to confront him, she dropped an arch little curtsey. He bowed gravely. I blushed crimson at my stupid mistake. But John

Gladman came to my rescue, honestly unaware that he had been recently snubbed.

‘Why, you’re all astray, Lady Digges ! It was *me*, not Bracy, Miss Pleasance was going to ask ; for we had just settled it together.’

‘Oh, well ; that is all right then,’ answered Alice with careless grace. So we all filed in to dinner.

During the interminable dinner-hours we now spent in eating and drinking, or rather on my part refusing course after course of fine new dishes, and old wines, my ears and outward attention seemed lent to John. In reality, my inner self was given up to Clair ; pleading, reasoning against his anger with my shyness, till at last my mind quite exhausted itself with the double effort. My eyes, too, uselessly turned away from the

honest, smug face on my left, to look down the long table to the right.

It was impossible to see Clair, for he sat on our side. But still it required a constant effort to keep gaze and thoughts from straying.

After a while I found John explaining volubly, in answer to my almost mindless queries, how it was he had been asked to Broadhams. It seemed Fulke Bracy had before promised to spend this very time at Wheatfield ; so declined Lady Digges's hospitality. Then—having pressed for his reasons —she had conclusively gained her object by sending a flattering invitation, likewise, to young Gladman, as the son of her father's old friend.

‘ So I scored there, I rather think,’ ended good John, with a satisfied air.

‘ But I say, aren’t you eating anything ?

what a shame ! Why, Sir Dudley pays £300 a year to his cook.'

Catching his own name, my brother-in-law, close to whom we were sitting, looked up.

John Gladman, with a genial air of certitude that he was making himself pleasant, bent forward to explain.

' I was just saying, Sir Dudley, that I *do* go in for a regular feed at your dinners. It's really worth while being hungry for them ! And after our drive to-day I went off for a sharp walk round the park by myself, till it was pitch dark, and came in with a glorious appetite.'

' Bless my heart,' returned Sir Dudley in his thick, slow voice, with that magnificent disregard of politeness one notices sometimes in rich men. ' One would think you were talking of gorging on bacon and beans.'

' But why, Sir Dudley ? Aren't you

generally hungry yourself?' returned the abashed John, staring with significantly round eyes at his host's plate piled with *crème de volaille*, succeeding mountains of previous succulent dishes like Pelion on Ossa—Verily it was no wonder he asked.

'Never!' quoth my brother-in-law, quoting Punch, with a self-glorying smile at his own happy memory. 'I'm never hungry, but thank God, I'm greedy! Hullo! what's that—*did you say no!* to that dish?'—And, to the consternation of the Pawlett girls who were nearest him, his little eyes, that, set in his heavy head, gave him some resemblance to a hippopotamus, transfixed Rose, who sat opposite us, with displeased astonishment.

'I did,' said Rose, bravely. 'I'll have some plain meat by and by, thank you: I don't care for *entrées*.'

‘Plain meat!—Don’t care!’—ejaculated the chief ally of our family in pious horror; then solemnly to the servants, whose circling progress he had arrested as suddenly as if they represented the sun, and he Joshua in the valley of Ajalon. ‘Bring back that dish to Miss Rose Brown.’ (By this time the eyes of half the table were upon the luckless freshly-come-out damsel who dared to beard the greatest gourmet of five counties round, as to what she should choose to eat in his house!) ‘How often have you been at a large dinner since you left your schoolroom?’ he next inquired impressively.

‘Hardly at all, I am happy to say; for I like tea and bread-and-jam best,’ saucily responded Rose, trying some of the unknown food on the tip of her fork with an air of extreme suspicion.

‘Lord help you, child, your education is hardly begun ; you don’t know *what to eat !* Thank goodness, you were sent to my house. From henceforth you must sit every night beside me, and I’ll teach you.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ nodded Rose, with a mutinous little smile.

The intense pity with which I regarded our unfortunate youngest one can hardly be described ; whilst John Gladman eyed her with no less of astonished admiration.

‘Well, I say !—she has pluck ! I’d no more think of cheeking Sir Dudley like that than—than—.’ Failing in any comparison, he applied himself to his dinner ; if with less outward sign of enjoyment, yet still with considerable suppressed satisfaction.

As we ladies left the dinner-table, Alice archly gave orders, in a low tone, to several

of the younger gentlemen near her, not to remain too long in the dining-room.

Accordingly they promptly followed, leaving Sir Dudley, Lord Pawlett, and a few of the old school over their wine.

‘And now! let us all go to the billiard-room, and have a gamble,’ cried Alice, Mrs. Jessop, and Lady Pawlett, who seemed the leading spirits. Or rather her ladyship encouraged them all with effusive good-humour and gaiety, anxious not to let herself be left behind in the race by the younger generation. Yet she was cautiously discreet; so that if visiting later any Puritan household she might be able to hold up her hands a little over the Broadhams doings, insinuating she had only gone with the tide.

‘Good night, Pleasance and Rose. I am going to bed; and if you take my advice you

will both go too,' grimly said Charlotte Pawlett to us aside ; adding with a deep sigh, ' Amy, I am sorry to say, is too fond of the opinion of the world to do as I do. She has ceased to be united with me in all things (as we once were, heart and soul !).'

' It is you who have changed and gone to such extremes,' returned poor Amy in a like undertone, nearly crying.

' But if I can save !—(or perhaps I ought to say warn) you young girls from being drawn into the—the—the evil habits here (as I feel they are !), it is only doing my duty,' ended Charlotte. Her sentences sounded oddly mixed to us ; all the main portion being solemnly delivered, whilst her many parentheses were weak and weepy.

' All this about going to bed!—Not I, thank you ; why, the fun of the evening is

just beginning,' quoth Rose decidedly, while I asked, more far-seeing :

' Why ! what do they do in the billiard-room, that is so very dreadful ? '

' They smoke'—Amy hesitated, with a frightened look at her sister.

' *Smoke!*—you ought to be truthful, instead of uttering such a miserable equivocation ! ' Charlotte darted in, with a withering glance ; then turning her back on us all, stalked from the room.

' Really, though Charlotte is so good herself, I wish she would not always accuse everybody else of telling lies,' Amy complained to us, looking miserable.

' I *was* just going to tell you both that, besides, they always play for money.'

' Come on ; come on, won't you two join us ? I know you will ! ' cried Mrs. Jessop at

the moment with merry patronage, and an enticing smile to us both as she passed, adding in very audible tones of warm flattery to Alice:

‘What dear girls your sisters look ; so nice and fresh about everything ; just what I love !’

In the billiard-room, to our surprise, the innocent-looking cover of a table was removed, and a green roulette-cloth shown beneath it.

‘Now then—ladies and gentlemen, make your game ! make your game !’ cried Clair St. Leger, installing himself as banker at the head of the table and giving a preliminary spin or two to the roulette with a lively rattle. ‘Put on your stakes ! Red and even has it this time—come, pile on the money !’

‘I mean to break the bank ; I dreamt last night what number would win ; just that of my own age,’ cried Mrs. Jessop, placing herself beside St. Leger by a decided

movement, and gaily putting five sovereigns on 28.

There was an outcry all round, of mixed dissuasion and applause, which I did not understand.

‘I’ll stand by you, Jenny,’ cried my sister Alice, and she put two half sovereigns *à cheval* beside the supposed lucky number. In a trice, the table was covered with notes and gold.

‘You are not going to play, *are* you?—it will be high to-night,’ said Mr. Bracy in an undertone in my ear, making me start; for standing shyly aloof, looking in a half-dream at Clair and the Jessop widow, I did not know who was beside me.

‘Shall I not? . . I don’t know, quite; not of course that I care to play high, you know (confidentially), but as every one else is doing so—’

The truth was, my heart hankered to stand on Clair's other side.

' You will find that every one will not be playing. Some of the quieter spirits are sure to have a game of billiards, which you could easily join.' Then seeing I hesitated still, he added, ' Not that I meant for a moment to force my advice upon you ; even though you gave me the privilege of considering myself an old friend.'

' No ; but please do advise me, Mr. Bracy ! I should be really glad ; for you understand roulette, and I know nothing—'

' Pleasance, Pleasance ! are you coming to play ? Come—put on your money, quick ! ' cried Alice.

' Say you want to play billiards,' urged Bracy in a hasty whisper ; so acting on what I guessed to be a warning, I thus answered.

On which Alice shrugged her shoulders with a dissatisfied air.

‘ You see how much they are putting on,’ went on Fulke Bracy, explaining the nature of the stakes to my comprehension.

‘ What ! Mr. St. Leger might lose all that ! — ’ I exclaimed, horror-stricken ; then, to cover my involuntary betrayal, added with somewhat bitter playfulness, ‘ And so twenty-eight is Mrs. Jessop’s age ? ’

‘ She says so, and she “ ought to know ! ” — how one may be deceived, for I should have imagined over forty to be nearer the mark,’ smiled Bracy. But, at that moment, Clair spun the roulette, and my foolish heart quite leapt with anxiety for him to win. Rattle ! rattle ! rattle ! round flew the ball, leaping, spinning ; it settled, but the colours still swam and shivered before my straining eyes ;

slower and slower the board revolved, slackened—stopped—at number 28 !

There was such a burst of exclamations at the surprising coincidence that they quite deafened me. I could hardly get a glimpse of Clair's face, as all crowded round him to assure their eyes of the number having been veritably hit. Then as I stood behind the rest, heart-sorry at the result of this my first spectacle of drawing-room play, Sir Dudley put a heavy hand on my shoulder.

'Come to the billiard-table, and don't stand watching those fools. 'Pon my honour, 'pon my honour ! never saw such a thing in my life. All chance—but now the women will go staring mad trying to dream their numbers. Humph ! St. Leger must be rather sharply hit.'

Now I could see poor Clair, and for all

that he was trying to smile all round, and laugh gaily whilst pencilling I O U's to almost everybody. It was forced, so sympathy told me, and I took up my cue with a heavy heart.

Feeling in a dream, I played very badly, as Sir Dudley did not fail loudly and repeatedly to exclaim, vastly relishing his own bluntness. I must have been lost to proper consciousness of all around, indeed, that it never struck me where Rose might be; though at any other time I would at once have given Bracy's warning (for as such it seemed meant) to our youngest—who in all serious matters regarded my behests more than what Alice might say, although calling me 'a dear old goose.'

Conscience gave me a sharp rap when, after nearly an hour, up came Rose to our staid group. We were watching Sir Dudley

stretching his ponderous body over the table, and puffing at an enormous cigar, whilst making a few cannons with great deliberation and tremendous difficulty. ‘ You have surely not been playing ? ’ I exclaimed aghast ; suddenly waking up to the fact that her bright little face was pursed up in a peculiar way.

‘ I have though. Alice and Mrs. Jessop dragged me over, and lent me some money.’

‘ Well ; and what happened ? Did you lose ? Egad ! little monkey, I *hope* you lost,’ put in our big brother-in-law, listening.

‘ I got,’ said Rose slowly, with a quaint little twinkle of ashamed fun, ‘ just ten shillings worth—of experience.’

Then, as Sir Dudley, who had especially made her his favourite, and showed it by teasing, expanded his chest and laughed boisterously, she proceeded.

‘I’m not one bit sorry I played, all the same, for I wanted to know what it was like—so now I know. John Gladman wanted me to play just as he did ; he’s got some cautious way of sticking on the dozens, and says he never loses and often wins—but Mrs. Jessop said it wasn’t sporting, and pulled my money off ; so I lost.’

‘Well, you’ve learnt something to-night, anyhow,’ pursued Sir Dudley.

‘Yes,’ said Rose impudently ; ‘how bad tobacco smoke is, when you are all smoking like furnaces. If you are not choked, Pleasance, *I am !*’ Certainly I had been feeling the thick atmosphere rather stifling, not knowing what oppressed me so unusually ; for it requires custom to like a blinding tobacco parliament.

‘Had you not better go to bed, dear ?’ I

said, in a slow, weary way, feeling disappointed and dissatisfied. ‘ I’ll go with you, too ; that is, if Sir Dudley will not mind.’

‘ No, no, children ; go if you like,’ answered he, gruffly, but kindly, with a sort of regretful quiet ; adding, ‘ In former days, my old mother never would have allowed this sort of thing either, just like yours’ (he forgot his age), ‘ but now Alice likes it, you see—and so—’

We both retired, seeing it perplexed him to finish his sentence. As we skirted the gaming-table, my eagerly watchful eyes saw that Clair, having relinquished the banker’s post, was now staking like the rest with a subdued air ; so intent on the game he did not even *see* me.

‘ What’s the matter, dears ? why are you slipping away ? ’ asked Alice, affectionately

enough, disengaging herself from the rest. She remembered it was our first visit from home—and supposed us shy.

‘The smoke gives us a headache. Don’t be vexed, but we’re not quite used to it, *you* know !’ I replied for her hearing only. Rather to my surprise she answered kindly, ‘Yes, and you look tired too, poor Pleasance ; there are black circles under your eyes. Well, you had better not sit up ; for when Lady Pawlett and Dudley and these other old fogies go off for their beauty sleep, Jenny Jessop is sure to have her cigarette and a few more—so your heads would be worse. I’ve not seen much of you yet ; but still I’m so glad you’ve come.’

‘Let me get you some seltzer or soda-water,’ offered Bracy with quiet attention, following us to the door, where was a side-table

with all sorts of strong and weaker waters, to quench thirst.

‘*You played yourself after all!*’ I said, looking rather reproachfully up at him. There was no clear logic in my mind ; but still it seemed to me he ought not to have done so, and helped to fleece poor Clair (in a way) after warning *me*.

‘That is quite a different matter. I am an old man—and steady—compared with you,’ he smiled, with a rather protecting, fatherly manner.

‘Has—has Mr. St. Leger lost very much?’ I ventured to add, dreadfully afraid lest I should blush, seizing the opportunity whilst Rose was thirstily drinking lemonade like a school-girl. My old friend just glanced at my face, and no more; then as quickly looked down.

'I believe he has got back a little of what they won from him ; and probably before the night is over luck may turn still more in his favour.'

Upon that I went away, stealing one lingering look unseen at the roulette-table.

CHAPTER VI.

‘SORROW may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning !’ It may be so ; and often gratefully we do so feel it ! But how often again we merely rise bodily refreshed by the night’s rest ; and so a little stronger, but no more hopeful, buckle on each our pack of daily worries and troubles till nightfall comes once more.

Thus I thought, on rising the next morning at Broadhams—and for several following mornings. Never had I imagined myself such stuff as heroines are made of ; but only a poor human being, who must not expect the sun to be always shining bright over her

head, when others around have rain often enough, heaven knows !

If Clair neglected me, it was not my nature to take it lightly as Alice might. Nor had I beauty enough to attract other men immediately, as she would, in revenge or consolation. Neither could I accept my fate in a practical, sensible way, like even our little Rose ; who perhaps had more common sense than all the rest of us put together.

No ; feeling myself only a goose in the family ! for a little time admired by one man, and too proud of his liking maybe then, I now became again humbler and conscious of my own small worth ; not having it in my heart to be angry, but only hoping that at times I might be able to creep out of sight if suffering very much—for it would have been dreadful if other people had guessed it.

The pheasant-shooting was in full swing at Broadhams now, and at several neighbouring great houses. At least, these were all about eight or ten miles away, for everything seemed on a large and distant scale in this shire. Therefore at home, the gentlemen went straight out soon after breakfast in all their war-paint ; their minds rightly full only of guns, dogs, or perhaps tipping the keeper as to getting the best posts ; and it seemed to me natural and proper enough that what they had to do they should do it with all their heart. For, talk as some will, men are essentially different in minds from women—and cannot go brooding in this work-a-day world, but will even toil at play instead.

At lunch only, in the woods, we saw them these days, in some of the picturesque keepers' lodges. There, in the small best

parlours, hampers of good eatables and drinkables would be unpacked, leaving hardly room for us all to crush in and feed with our elbows in each other's plates. Even this concession Sir Dudley did *not* at all like. It was an innovation on the old immemorial customs of Broadhams, which only devotion to Alice could have induced him to make.

Once indeed Mrs. Jessop proposed, under cover of Alice's suggestion, that some of the ladies might also go out shooting; she herself being very proficient with a light gun. On this, Sir Dudley lost his temper, and was so rough that Alice—who could not have hit a haystack herself at thirty paces—fled, holding her hands over her pretty ears.

At nightfall these sportsmen would then return, muddy and tired. Later, after dinner, roulette still held its sway. Alice herself

now justified me and Rose in keeping aloof from it—and in amusing her husband.

‘ You can’t afford to play high out of your pocket-money ; and it only bothers the rest to have sixpences and shillings among our sovereigns,’ she said. ‘ Besides, it would worry dear old father with his old-fashioned notions ; and as to mother—she’d have a fit ! ’ (And Alice held up her hands at the bare idea.)

Therefore, it will be seen, I had to make up my mind to few chances of seeing Clair—And those few were all silently but vigorously disputed with me by Mrs. Jessop. There was no doubt about it—we were rivals !

During two days she had treated me with effusive amenities, as Alice’s sister. Then on the third at luncheon, in the South lodge, she had eagerly called to Clair, offering a seat beside herself on the corner of a table.

‘No, thanks,’ he replied in his lazy, almost insolently pleasant way, from where he had just established himself in a window-ledge with me and a game pie. ‘I am very happy here beside Miss Pleasance Brown.’

A little glow of triumph warmed my heart at his words. What woman would not feel so? But it almost died in a shiver the next minute, as with a loud laugh and, ‘Please yourself,’ the widow turned to those near her, remarking with gay significance:

‘Let us hope want will not come in at the door, to send love out of the window.’

There was a laugh over there around her: but in a subdued way that seemed to say his friends thought it near enough the truth for them to fear hurting Clair’s feelings. He bit his lip—that I saw! Ah! I knew he loved me, cared for me, liked best being near

me. But that widow followed him so ; flattered, almost worshipped him ; and he did not dislike the incense, seeing she was still a comely and agreeable woman. What man would, I asked myself in fairness of spirit ; knowing it was impossible to me to go and do likewise, I was too proud to ‘run after him.’ And so, little wonder, in our bustling eager parties I was soon pushed aside. All I could do, and did, with my whole heart, was to try and bear it lovingly, patiently ; and trust, with some secret tears, for the best.

But if Mrs. Jessop gave up ‘cultivating’ my friendship, she was a thousand times the more charming to Rose, whom she called her sweet little Rosebud. And when often the latter showed herself ‘set about with wilful thorns,’ the merry widow still declared she

loved a high spirit, and commended the child for not allowing herself to be snubbed.

‘Going to walk with Mrs. Jessop again,’ I said with a foreboding heart, on the third afternoon this had happened. ‘I *wish* you did not go with her so much.’

‘And who else is there left to walk with, I’d like to know,’ answered Rose, raising her impudent little face saucily. ‘You are never without Amy Pawlett fastened on you’ (this was true enough), ‘and *I* think *her* tiresome. Would you have me take to Charlotte; for it *would* be more penance than she even ever did! Then Alice has inveigled her dear Mr. Bracy away from the shooters to drive in her pony-carriage to see some ruins. He is crazy on old ruins; and, as Mrs. Jessop says, he is very like a well-preserved one himself.’

‘ Mr. Bracy !—what a ridiculous idea ! ’

‘ Not at all. Fine old family fallen into decay, and patched up again pretty passably with commoner rubble, meaning vulgar bank-cheques. He looks it so thoroughly too—with his quiet aristocratic air, and the way he holds his head higher than all the other men. Besides, he is getting bald ; part of his hair was quite thin when I was looking at him yesterday in the full light.’

‘ No matter for that ! He is one of those men who would look well, even a good deal balder. They say it is from thinking that people lose their hair,’ cried I, warming up in defence of my old friend, Mr. Fulke.

‘ Ah, Pleasance ! Pleasance ! that drew you, as Bob says ! Why I thought the only man in the house you ever looked at, (when

you *do* look at him,) was Mr. St. Leger ; and he won't wear out that curly head of his with too much brain work,' cried Rose roguishly.

Then, after a few seconds—as my face must have slightly fallen in expression at her chance shaft that was only too truly double-pointed—she added affectionately :

' But you look rather odd to-day ; not exactly moping or cross, but as if you were nervous and out of sorts. Is anything wrong with you, Pleasance dear ? Look here, I can't well throw over the Begum, but still do come with us ! She's not so bad after all, really.'

Mrs. Jessop, we lately found, had been christened the Begum in the smoking-room, on account of her reputed wealth and gorgeous attire.

' No, no ; thanks,' I answered, with indeed

some nervousness and haste, as Rose had detected.

‘In fact I would have walked with Amy, but that I—I would rather not now, and was thinking perhaps you would take her off my hands.’

‘Can’t, dear, you see; but don’t worry about her. She can go with the rest of “the pack” for to-day,’ finished Rose cheerily, putting the last touches to her trim furry toilette, and dancing out of the room.

‘The pack’ was an expression invented by Mrs. Jessop for all the other guests who ebbed and flowed in and out of Broadhams; whereas she had established herself evidently in intention therein for even a much longer term than ourselves, Alice’s sisters. We were always so large a party that I got to know few of these three-days sojourners well; for

naturally, without meaning to be exclusive, we, the nucleus of the guests, kept more together. Besides, when Alice was speedily weary of trying to ‘amuse these creatures’ (which duty she fitfully attempted with an air of graceful toilsomeness), Lady Pawlett was always ready to take the task into her own experienced hands. She would pat Alice softly on the shoulder, saying, ‘Silly child! but after all, young things will be young things; and it is quite natural you should wish to amuse yourself, my love. Leave the drudgery to me.’ Certainly no more amiable sister-in-law could now be imagined. I hardly understood it at first, having been admitted to a private view of Lady Pawlett’s character. But, presently, I overheard her speeding one departing guest (who had a big house of her own), with a

tender clasp of the hand, and the words, ‘Well, good-bye, *dear*; and I *hope* (significantly) we shall soon see you back here again.’

‘Oh, thanks, dear Lady Pawlett,’ replied the thus partly-invited one, with a flattered air, ‘but I hope we shall see you first with us. Let us know when you can come, will you not? Now, pray do—you will bring your girls too, of course.’ In this way Lady Pawlett paid her debts of hospitality, without being at any more expense than implying some fibs; whilst she also preserved the appearance of playing still Lady Paramount in her brother’s house.

It was now Saturday afternoon. And since the beginning of the week my movements, or rather want of movement and quiescence during the surrounding bustle, have been faithfully outlined.

But this day only had been!—might still be, blissfully different!

Firstly, it was ordained at breakfast-time by Sir Dudley that the sportsmen should shoot a damp, dismal, outlying wood; where he was evidently delighted to tell us there was no lodge, hut, or even logs of trees that would give the ladies the slightest excuse for joining them at lunch.

Alice had pouted on this intelligence. Then the happy thought struck her that she had been longing ‘for ages’ to see an old monastery well, with a bit of ruined wall and some loose stones likewise belonging thereto, which lay beyond the wood. And—as every one knew how troublesome her ponies were to hold in—most reasonably some gentleman must kindly leave off his shooting by afternoon to take care of her; fixing on Bracy

finally with a pretty apology, as believing him least selfish and with a fellow-feeling for all that was old and beautiful.

‘For all that is young and beautiful, I should say, eh, old fellow,’ muttered Sir John Dudgeon, a young brother baronet of Sir Dudley’s, who loved open-air sports, and could only endure being indoors by help of practical joking, gambling, and horse-play. He nudged Clair with a suppressed guffaw as he spoke. ‘There is no woman living for whom I would give up my shooting, I know! Come; what do you say?’

‘It would depend a good deal on the shooting. This old wood is so deadly swampy and full of brambles, I should not have much minded giving up the fag end of the day myself,’ returned Clair lightly and pleasantly enough, but moving away. For

though the Dudgeon dinners and coverts were quite to his taste, their owner was less so.

We were all in the hall watching them start. Clair's eye had caught mine as he spoke. *Chance*—no doubt!—had lately made it so perversely difficult for him even to look at me, but now he came close by me, apparently occupied in examining his cartridge-case; paused, and said in a quick and gaily-meaning undertone: ‘Where do you take your walks abroad to-day, my Lady Penserosa?’ Then murmured, ‘Do you know the old quarries and the cave under the oak-wood? Could you be there, do you think, about half-past three this afternoon—alone? and I shall manage to get away from the other guns if I can.’

It took me so by surprise, after the past

three days, during which he had given not the least sign of our being more to each other than the rest of the world—that my lips quivered, despite that I bravely tried to set my face while answering, ‘Do you really want me?’

‘Really—yes! Of course, you might know I *always* do; only that of late things have been contrary. Say you are coming, Pleasance—at last’ (this in a still lower whisper).

I mutely nodded; then, with a heavy-hearted smile, repeated, ‘At last. It is some time since you really wanted me. But to-day you seem quite happy. What is it?’

‘Well, I won a tremendous amount last night; had the most wonderful run of luck, for one thing. All the other nights I was obliged to play in order to get back some of

my losses ; but now '—with a joyous air—‘ I am free again, and this is the first use I make of my freedom. You thought me a careless brute lately, did you not, pet ? but if you knew what I felt about it all on that first night you came. . . Well, well ; this afternoon you shall hear my confession, and will give the poor sinner absolution, I hope.’ He had said it with a smile so tender, a tone so winning, that my whole heart went out towards him in forgiveness of what he had tacitly caused me to suffer. And yet, Heaven knew ! I had been miserable.

Therefore, now I was dressing myself to go out in eager haste. Yet again I was slow of speed, because in throes of doubt which of two feathered hats became me most ; hesitating in agony whether a large spotted veil or a small spot looked prettiest. Logical

people might have told me that Clair would never care what I had on, so that my efforts to please him in this way were nonsense. But logic was no strong point of mine; while I was also convinced that men always know when we look our best, though they might *not* know how the general effect was produced.

There was a knock at the door. How unlucky.

'Come in,' I said, in a very small voice.

'I came to see what you were going to do this afternoon, Pleasance,' said Amy Pawlett, coming in. 'What, dressed! Why did you not tell me sooner, and I would have had my things on too.'

'I—did not tell you, because—well, the truth is, because I rather wished to go out alone this afternoon, Amy; if you don't

think it unkind of me to say so,' was my answer, given rather hesitatingly.

'Unkind! no; why should I?' said my friend in her sensible, unemotional voice; then suddenly, with a gleam of intelligence lighting up her plain features, 'You are going *out* alone, you say, but. . . Well, I'm no busybody, nor a gossip about other people's matters, only—only, Pleasance, darling, take care you are not trying to catch a sunbeam.'

And so saying she left the room, and was gone before I could say another word to her.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW thick and red the leaves lay down
by the quarry wood !

I trod in them ankle-deep, and their rustle and even their dying autumn smell pleased my mood, that was low-tuned and plaintively set, yet not without some gleams of wintry sun and hopes of future brightness as of spring. The quarry, as it was still called, had never been much worked, and not within living memory ; it stood out barely in sheets of smooth natural rock here and there through the downward hanging wood.

As I went along, with almost a guilty glad feeling, hastening, yet wishing not to seem

in haste—in case a pair of laughing blue eyes should be watching me unawares from among the trees or brushwood on either hand, or the quarry rocks—my own darkly dressed figure was yet the only living thing to be seen in the wintry scene around. It was the wildest, perhaps the only natural spot in all the Broadhams demesne. The sinking sun just peeped through the tree-stems to westward, and smote the quarry-top, all fringed with ivy and bramble-trails, with a warm glow.

No one here !

I looked all round, walked a little way on, then back ; but there was no one to be seen.

It was lonely waiting there, but still I did not like to leave the quarry and wander further, for just beyond there were several diverging wood-paths, where I might easily

miss Clair. That would have been maddening. My whole heart was set on meeting him face to face ; then surely he *must* have something to say to me of his future, of—ours !

At moments my heart, that had been heavy and sick with disappointment these last days, rose up in revolt, and cried dumbly in reproach against him. Yet again I resolved not to blame him. He had been misled by others ; by circumstances. My fancy was fertile in a thousand ideas to prove that his heart was true. At any rustle in the bushes, or other slightest sound, my pulses beat so rapidly that I would gladly have run away—though my lips tried to smile a welcome with nervous gladness.

Alas ! there was so much pain mingled, now, with what had been in summer my pure

happiness. Would that happiness ever be the same again? was a cold, ugly doubt that crept into my mind perforce. No use thinking of it !

There were some jutting rocks at the quarry foot, a little hidden by the brushwood, and on one of these I sat down to wait. All sorts of confused images swam through my mind ; not that I did really think ; for what *could* I think ? All depended on Clair, not on me ; and after these last three days my head was troubled by my heart.

All at once there was a little trill of music overhead. A few long inhalations made the first sharply-sweet notes, then came a prolonged twitter of pure joy. Looking up, the ashen-grey coat and red breast of a robin was visible overhead on a bare twig, his whole little body quivering

with the effort and rapture of that gush of gladness. Dear small songster, when all the other feathered crowd are mute in chilly weather, save for twitterings and chirpings of recognition at eventime.

Listening to him, my heart softened imperceptibly ; I knew not how or why ! and to my own great surprise a rush of warm tears came into my eyes. Ah ! Clair, Clair ! If you only wished, I would follow you to the world's end, would slave, pinch, toil, and weary for you ; nay, more, be the brain-carrier, the worker, thinker, the stronger of two through all trouble—as your wife, my heart whispered low—must needs be !

There came a hum of approaching voices.

My heart began to knock so against its cells, that being still unaccustomed to any such action on its part, I felt quite startled

with myself. Who could it be? Some of the ‘outsiders,’ no doubt. They would find me here; carry me off with them; vex Clair; interrupt our meeting.

I looked round for some place to hide. But—unless cowering down like a partridge—which my pride would never have risked the indignity of doing, there was no sufficient covert among either rocks or bushes.

Next moment they appeared in sight.

Clair and Mrs. Jessop walking closely side by side in the narrow path!—followed at a little distance by Rose and John Gladman.

The widow was chatting gaily, throwing sweetest glances at Clair; as if trying by every means in her power to arrest his whole attention. He came on, carrying his gun; seeming moody and ill at ease, and not look-

ing at her, but ahead under his lowered eye-lids, so saw me first.

‘What, Miss Brown !’—exclaimed the widow with an affected laugh, but a gleam of something more than mere surprise in her vivacious eyes, as I made my appearance among the wintry bushes ahead of them.
‘Why, what are you doing here, all alone ? Or, excuse me—ha, ha ! *are* you alone ? It looks very like an appointment, I declare. Are you waiting for some one, my dear ?’

‘Taking one of your favourite solitary walks ?’ said Clair, with contrasting studied politeness ; banishing every other vestige of expression from his face, as I did not deign any reply to Mrs. Jessop and her brilliant wit, beyond a cold smile. ‘Won’t you join us, now that we have met you ?’

‘Yes, yes ; pray do !’ chimed in Mrs.

Jessop, at once changing her tone to one of friendly warmth. And as Rose and John Gladman, coming up too, hailed me, of course I went on with them all. But I was so self-conscious of having *really* been found waiting for somebody that I could hardly find any words to say ; and never dared look at Clair. As to the widow she kept up a lively fire of banter, and her spirits seemed to grow higher every minute.

At first Clair did not respond very warmly to all these advances ; but still he did respond. And I inwardly envied his superior self-control to mine, for his answering gaiety was forced, I could see well enough. Presently we heard a loud halloo behind : and Bracy was seen coming after us at a swinging pace, that reminded me of the way in which he used to go over the moors and hills on Dartmoor.

‘The plot thickens !’ exclaimed the widow with a loud laugh as he joined us. Then she nodded her head significantly, first at him, and then at me. ‘This is most suspicious !—Miss Pleasance Brown walking alone in the quarry wood ; and now *you* come this way too. What have you done with Lady Digges ? Oh, fie !’

‘What do you mean ?’ asked Bracy shortly enough, in a way that would have made *me* feel small, and ready to curl up like a sensitive plant. Without being ever rough, he was a masterful man ; and if he did not like a speech or action could show his mind very freely. But Mrs. Jessop had no oversensitive feelings, and began to recount in her own fashion gaily how they had met me. Bracy’s eyes just scanned my face with one of those quick, kindly smiles I knew well ; when

he looked so, it always gave me the impression that he understood me thoroughly.

‘I have only just left Lady Digges at the lodge,’ he said. ‘We met Sir Dudley there, and, as he said he would be glad of a lift home, I gave him up my seat. No doubt, Miss Brown, you could account as easily for your presence; but I don’t see why Mrs. Jessop should catechise us all in this way.’

‘Neither do I,’ cried I, plucking up a faint spirit; for if a lover troubles a friend encourages one. So we all went on in a group.

‘Now let us have a race,’ cried Mrs. Jessop, as we came out of the woods on a broad gravel drive. ‘Come along, you dear little Roly-poly!—I’m sure you can’t run’—(to Rose, who was promptly indignant). ‘Well, then, your sister can’t; she is too meek and mild ever to do anything so wild.

‘Can’t she just ! why, she used to go like a bird !’ loudly interrupted John Gladman, whilst I looked up astonished at my rival’s daring audacity of petty insult.

‘What, really ! I beg your pardon, my dear, but you remind me so much of Lydia Languish this afternoon, I should never have thought it.’

‘Haw, haw ! Lydia Languish !—capital name !’ shouted that good goose John, understanding nothing about it, but ready to join in everything ; whilst Clair, with a man’s impartiality in such feminine tiltings, looked away.

‘Are we all ready ? Now—one ! two ! three !—and away !’

Away we started. Truly never had I run with a heavier heart, fancying in my foolish way that Clair had thought my new name perhaps appropriate. Rose and I were running

easily and lightly ahead of the widow, whom we could hear coming flop! flop! with heavier footfalls behind us; whilst the men amused themselves as umpires, keeping midway—when, after a few paces, Mrs. Jessop gave an affected little outcry, and catching hold of Clair's arm, declared she was desperately hurt.

'Oh, my ankle . . . no, my foot . . . I am dead lame! don't laugh at me, you unkind creature! it is dreadfully twisted, and you will have to support me home,' she cried with mock grimaces of pain, pretending to be hardly able to stand.

'What a humbug you are!—you are not hurt in the least,' I heard Clair say, as if amused at her nonsense, as we paused.

'Indeed!—indeed I am though, a little!' and with a clinging, helpless gesture, which to me seemed in such a big woman intensely silly

even disgusting—she clasped his arm with both her hands, and looked up pathetically in his eyes. For the moment, she was not aware we had stopped; or else did not care. But then, perceiving our battery of stern or curious vision fixed on her, begged of us in a soft altered voice not to ‘trouble ourselves waiting.’

‘ You girls can run on and have your race. Mr. Gladman and Mr. Bracy will take care of you both—won’t you, Mr. Gladman? —while we come slowly on.’

Bracy to this never answered a word.

‘ But we’re so awfully sorry if you are hurt,’ returned John dubiously; then regarding Rose and myself, he added, ‘ As to the Miss Browns—why, of course, I can take care of them; how “happy could I be with either”—only we’d rather not leave you.’

Rose was looking rather oddly at her

friend. I could not say a syllable, there was such a pain in my breast. I never knew till then that jealousy or hurt love meant bodily pain—real dull soreness of heart, lasting sickeningly for a minute or two—after that woman had clasped Clair's arm so, and given such a look up in his eyes.

The first time!—happy that I was, without knowing it! Many a time in many months that followed (though, thank God, not in later years) did I come to know that same dull ache only too well. To have a sore heart, is no mere figure of speech as some people fancy.

Well; though I said never a word, and the widow persisted we must be sighing to return home more quickly, but need not wait for her, Rose declared we could not think of being so unkind. She was stoutly echoed by John Gladman, who was urgent to help Clair

to carry the widow, by making a ‘lady’s chair,’ clasping each other’s wrists. The scornful look with which she refused this generous offer made him cross; so that, plunging his hands in his pockets, he turned his back, muttering, ‘*We’re not wanted!* Let us walk on.’

We went on, therefore, keeping in front; feeling uncomfortable all the way. I dared not look round—yet my ears seemed set painfully to hear what passed behind, though I hated myself for eavesdropping; but honour towards my rival seemed slipping away from me. As to Fulke Bracy, he came too, but hardly said a word; whilst John Gladman and Rose alone chatted.

Slowly we reached the Broadhams door, which was not, however, far distant. Then Rose waited for her friend, who came leaning

certainly heavily on Clair's arm, but I was *certain* only shamming a little limp.

' Gladman ! '—called out St. Leger as he relinquished his charge, who assured him with thanks, and no doubt truthfully, that she was much better—' Gladman, I want to go round to the stables ; will you come ? '

So that meant good-bye to me.

He met my eyes in passing ; then looked away in a manner that, rightly or wrongly, made me think Mrs. Jessop had rallied him about finding me by the quarry. One makes wild guesses at these things, and sometimes comes very near the truth.

As the rest dispersed, Fulke Bracy came up to me.

' You were going to say something,' I said inquiringly, turning with a weary feeling as he seemed about to speak, then stopped himself.

‘ Yes—no. Nothing—except that—won’t you have a glass of wine? You are looking quite pale; that run was too much for you. Do let me get you some.’ He looked at me, as he spoke, with such real solicitude in his handsome face and kindly eyes, that my heart warmed to my old friend. Feeling nervous and disappointed, it was with difficulty I could restrain a gush of tears; though trying to laugh brightly at him while refusing.

Then my escape was hastily made; but glancing back from the inner hall, I saw Mr. Bracy looking after me with an expression of only the more concern, undeceived by my guile.

CHAPTER VIII.

HALF-an-hour later, I was lying on my bed, believing myself utterly alone in the great lonely room ; and—what woman can doubt it ?—weeping ! Weeping, not loudly ; but as if my only wish had been to dissolve myself, my pain, and all my troubled being away in tears.

Oh, it was weary work, living and loving ! How much better it would be to care for none beyond those of one's own family circle, who never agonized us thus ! So it seemed to me dimly in my sorrow. Surely it was hard of fate that other girls should be so happy in their engagements, and my love

bring me only mortification and sorrow. Then two arms came round me, a shocked little voice exclaimed, ‘Pleasance, dearest, I never saw you cry so before !’ and Rose was kissing me. She being younger, and the pet and plaything, whilst I was graver and older, our Rose had never come out in the light of a comforter before ; but being such a sensible, practical small soul for her age, few could give consolation better.

‘What is it that vexed you so ?’ Rose had asked ; and then as I only murmured, trying to assure her it was all a nothing, she answered herself—‘It was something about Mrs. Jessop and Mr. St. Clair, wasn’t it ? There was such a curious look in your eyes. Dear Pleasance ! do tell me.’

So I told her ; though what I said I hardly knew.

‘Then you are engaged to him?’ said Rose in a rather awed voice, eying me with immense respect.

‘No, no, no,’ I returned impressively, raising myself on my arm to enforce the true state of matters upon her; and explain what Clair had said of his involved affairs, his hopes of some congenial employment, and meanwhile reluctance to bind me.

‘Oh, bother his reluctance! I call that horrid. I’d much rather be either on or off. No wonder you cry about it,’ exclaimed Rose, with almost a sparkle of wet in her own bright eyes. ‘I declare it’s a shame; and you ought to tell him you won’t have it.’

‘He could not help it, really. It is all the fault of his upbringing. He has always amused himself, and never did work before,’ I pleaded. ‘If we *had* only met to-day as he

asked me he would have told me all. How was it you both met him ?'

' Mrs. Jessop *would* go towards the wood. They were shooting, and then we met him coming alone away from it. I do not think he wanted to meet us ; but you know when people have to look pleasant it's so hard to know. Then John Gladman saw us ; so Mrs. Jessop chaffed him, saying three was bad company ! And *he* certainly was very glad to come,' said Rose reflectively. ' I wonder if she did guess. . ? '

' Ah, that widow ! If she would but leave him alone,' I moaned.

' Yes ; but then, you see, *she likes him too* ! It would be very nice if everybody else would just let us have things the way we want ; but I suppose they think the world was made for them as well,' said Rose, with a wise air of

seeing both sides of the question, but a soft low sigh that made the reproving words fall gently on my wounded spirit.

Her remark did me good. Why, how true it was ! I had been lately wishing all things to go just as I pleased, not thinking of my neighbours, and their wants ; as they knew not, or cared little for, my secret ones.

Rose and her loving consolation indeed so strengthened me, that this evening I came down-stairs with my face a little paler than usual, and my eyes heavier—but my heart resolved on patience and steadfastness.

It was all needed : for still things went amiss ; and again my spirit grew heavier, though not so weak as heretofore. Sir Dudley was very sulky, and ate even four times more than was good for him.

‘ He’s a perfect dog in the manger,’ said

Alice with high temper and an excitable air, signing to Mrs. Jessop to come near where we three sisters stood together before dinner, and then—only then to her new friend—disburthening her mind of the evident grievances Rose and I had already perceived.

It seemed enough to let us stand by and listen to her confidences, yet we two cared for her as this Jenny Jessop never would. ‘Dudley is so selfish, I am sure it would not give *him* the least pleasure to drive with me; for I can hardly ever find a word to say to him. He has absolutely no conversation; none! And yet he is so grumpy because I took Fulke Bracy out to-day instead of him! I like that; as if I might not have *my* particular friend! ’

‘ Still, do make it up with him—do take Sir Dudley out another day,’ I pleaded;

wincing slightly at the term, ‘*my friend*,’ applied by Alice to Fulke Bracy.

‘Don’t give in, my dear!—If you once begin that, there is no knowing where it may come to. Nail your colours to the mast; and *I’ll* back you up!’ declared Mrs. Jessop, clapping her on the shoulder, and speaking in the same breath as myself.

There was a great enough contrast in our words. There was as much, or more, in our persons. Buxom, tight-waisted, merry-eyed, with her high complexion and black hair, the widow made me feel a slight, colourless, shadowy creature beside her. She was so much brighter, more amusing and self-confident than me; no wonder a man should like her better, I grievedly thought in fairness. And yet surely, surely I might feel rightly conscious of having more heart and brain!

Alice and Mrs. Jessop began whispering together. I was roused to observe them by seeing my sister nod acquiescingly, with a rallying air, to some eagerly urged request of her friend. Then Alice called out, ‘ We are all to draw lots for going in to dinner. Somebody must write down all the gentlemen’s names on slips of paper (oh ! Amy—Charlotte Pawlett—you two won’t mind doing it ? And Pleasance shall help you ’).

We ladies all drew lots accordingly ; Alice holding the hat. Mrs. Jessop drew out—Clair St. Leger’s name. There was a significant smile on my sister’s face as she looked at her friend afterwards, that my watchful eyes noted, but it did not make me angry now. It all seemed just what must come, and had to be borne.

And that night the play was higher than

ever ; and Clair St. Leger lost back all his winnings—and far more.

And all that night, nothing witting of what was passing, I, fired by Rose's spirit, made a resolve ; and waked and thought, or dozed and dreamed, upon it with fearfulness, yet determination.

CHAPTER IX.

NEXT morning I woke, or rather forced myself to rise, with the weary feeling that a troubled Sunday was before me.

We went to Church, that is those of our party who were really piously or pharisaically disposed. Of course Rose and I went, the Pawletts, some of the short-stay visitors, John Gladman, and Mr. Bracy.

‘Are you going?’ Alice hurriedly asked as, when the carriages came round, she saw the latter appearing with a churchward air; and there was a quick light in her eyes.
‘I thought you would have stayed.’

‘No; I’m going, Lady Digges,’ responded

Bracy, hardly looking at her, and in a rough tone. Well, no ; not that. He was far too good and kind to be rough to any one, but still he never spoke to me in that curt voice, or my easily hurt sensibilities would have been mortified. He added, ‘ You are not going to say your prayers, I see—’

‘ Oh yes, yes ; I am. Only I am rather late. No matter, the brougham must wait for me. Will *you* keep the brougham back, Mr. Bracy, and send on the other people, please ? ’ And away Alice hurried to put on her bonnet.

Bracy coolly repeated her orders to the servants near, and then started off to walk alone.

‘ I say, Fulke, don’t you want me ? ’ asked John Gladman, rushing three steps after him ; then halting and eyeing a waggonette in

which Rose and I were already seated alone —being the earliest dressed for our devotions —with a wistful eye.

‘Want you; my dear fellow! No. I would not have you at any price. You had much better stay and take care of the young ladies,’ replied his older friend, smiling on his admiring and constant follower.

It was impossible to mistake Alice’s look of disappointment when she came down-stairs. Likewise I noticed nervously Lady Pawlett’s lofty eyes upon her, and the sweetly-amused voice in which that lady asked,

‘Who do you mean to have with you, now, dear ; as your cavalier has deserted you?’

‘Where is Jenny Jessop?’ asked Alice, sharply ; but the widow, as I knew beforehand only too well, was not coming to her devotions. And Clair St. Leger had not yet

appeared in the world down-stairs, when we started.

How hard I tried to fix my mind on the prayers that morning ; and, alas ! my foolish heart, how difficult it was ! The whole service was a struggle between my wandering thoughts and the effort to get, to almost force consolation from the divine promises which applied to trials and temptations, suffered for religion's sake—but not for love's sake !

And love was all that is worth living for, it seemed to me then ; without thinking the thought out clearly, or daring to avow it to myself, weak, foolish girl that I was.

Afterwards, the carriages brought us back to dull, grey Broadhams house. Hurriedly taking off my bonnet in my room, I hastened down-stairs.

All our little Broadhams world assembled

before lunch in the long saloon. There was Clair—whom I had so longed to speak to all morning ; but how do so now, and tell him what lay so heavily on my mind, amongst all these people ?

He looked dull and abstracted in manner, and so avoided my wistful eyes that it gave me a tightening pain around the heart. I did not know of his losses at play on the preceding night ; and so, not knowing, misjudged him, thinking only he was vexed with me—it might be because of our meeting having gone wrong on the day before, or because the widow had teased him. So, never guessing he looked away because ashamed of having played again, I grew wild in heart and foolishly excited. My great resolve formed overnight of seeing him, and having some explanation, was so urgent and

hot in my heart, that it seemed unbearable to be close to him and not dare to say those words. How the free-and-easy atmosphere of Broadhams must have influenced me, that—after trembling the first evening at meeting Clair in a gallery, used as a passage, and at his earnest request—I now resolved he *should* meet me, at my wish, and where we were not likely to be disturbed ! It was not that I felt careless of consequences like the other people here, but desperate.

Moved by sudden impulse, I rose abruptly, and went into a small writing-room. It formed part of the saloon, being only screened off by curtains looped back from an open door-way. Here sitting down, within hearing of the hum of the voices in the other room, I dashed off a few lines ; yet they seemed cold as if wet, not with ink, but the

still tears of pride and love. The very words I know no more now than if a stranger wrote them ; but the matter—the outcry from a woman's aching heart, which was being wrung quietly but effectually—that memory remains !

‘I wish to speak to you a few moments,—in private. If even you were the most ordinary acquaintance of mine you will come, being a gentleman, at my desire !’ This was at least the sense of what was expressed ; ending, ‘I shall be in the observatory tower this afternoon, soon after three !’

Before the last words were finished, came a voice from the doorway, which Mrs. Jessop had entered, and which she fairly filled.

‘What hot haste you are writing in, Miss Brown ! I am so sorry, but *are* you aware the post is already gone ?’ she asked, surveying me with laughing, criticizing black orbs.

Murmuring that it did not matter—my letter would keep—my pen faltered.

‘Pray don’t let me stop you,’ cried the widow, leaning caryatid fashion against the doorway, and giving a glance into the other room. Then, mounting guard as it seemed, she satirically hummed :

“Three little mice sat down to spin,
Pussy passed by, and she peeped in.
What are you doing, my little men ?
Writing notes to gentlemen.”

Oh, horror ! The tell-tale blood rushed to my cheeks, dyeing them hotly, agonizingly crimson. I put up my hand to screen my face, and leant my hand on it so ; trying to seem as if meditating on how to finish ; but a cold fear was on me that the widow was not deceived by the feint.

Then, hastily blotting the wet sheet on

a virgin page of the blotting book, I thrust the note into an envelope, and putting it into my pocket, walked steadily into the next room.

But—what was next to be done ?

To the end of my life, I shall never forget the uneasiness of the few following minutes. It was too daring to address Clair openly. He was standing by a group, rather than amongst it; listening abstractedly to Sir Dudley in the centre, declaiming that lunch was five minutes late and consulting everybody's watches. I moved as near as courage allowed, not knowing what to do.

Chance was kind, however. For as I stood turning over an album of English scenery, in doubt and trouble, a view caused me to exclaim,

‘ Mr. St. Leger, do come and look at this !

This lake reminds me so much of ours at Stoke. . . ?

Before Clair had roused himself from his air of graceful indolence, at my call, however, Fulke Bracy, hearing the name of Stoke, was at my side in a moment.

‘Where? That! Well, yes; it *has* rather a resemblance,’ he said with deep interest, but some disappointment.

‘Ah! you know Stoke too well. A comparative stranger to its beauties, like Mr. St. Leger, may see the likeness more than the many differences.’

So saying, and needing the greatest effort to keep my lips from trembling with nervousness at what I dared to do—I who had been the bashful, modest, and proud Pleasance of a half year ago—turned to Clair, begging pardon pitifully with my eyes, as I rather

awkwardly slipped my note upon the page, holding up the book to hide it. Quick as lightning, Clair's fingers closed upon my missive, so dexterously that even I hardly perceived the action; then it was somehow hidden, while not a muscle of his face moved the while. Even with the feeling of intense relief as I breathed again freely, came the quick thought that *he* seemed well used to such a method of delivering messages; while I was a shamefaced novice. At that moment I raised my head—Mrs. Jessop was regarding us with a steady inquiring stare: the only look I had almost ever seen her give without her laughing-mask on. She could have seen nothing; but evidently she was suspicious. No matter, the deed was done! she could not hinder it now; and the feeling of shame had passed away, for I believed my action was,

in truth, right. It was my firm intention to offer Clair St. Leger again the freedom for himself which he seemed—ah! my heart he *did* seem, in spite of all—to wish.

Then lunch was announced to Sir Dudley's satisfaction, and most of us trooped in; except a few like Bracy who never so indulged themselves; and the widow, who lingered behind.

'Don't mind me,' she answered, as Alice called to her to come with herself—for they generally went in arm-in-arm now, like a couple of school-girls.

'This is fast-day with me; you need not laugh! and I have got some writing to do, besides.'

'You are afraid of growing too stout, Mrs. Jessop, that is the *truth*! I suppose,' said Charlotte Pawlett severely, in passing, being shocked at the joke about

fastings. Charlotte became daily more and more harsh with herself and every one else ; therewith at the same time throwing off her mother's yoke which had made her such an un-individual being hitherto.

' Well, thank Heaven ! I am plump, and not scraggy. Ask the gentlemen, all, whether they don't admire a woman with a figure more than a drooping willow or a clothes-rail,' retorted Mrs. Jessop with vulgar insolence, glancing at Charlotte's severe outlines and my slimmer person who was innocently near. Sir John Dudgeon heard her and burst into a horse-laugh, remarking,

' That's it, Mrs. Jessop. Don't give in. I'd back you to hold your own in a war of words against any lady I ever knew ;' adding in an affectedly pathetic whisper, ' Poor number one ! What a life *he* must have led.'

The widow shook her head reprovingly at this sally of the rich youth, and retired to the writing-table. But after eight minutes she appeared amongst us all in the dining-room with some excuse; where she was persuaded into an excellent lunch, after all.

That afternoon at the appointed hour, I was waiting alone in the Observatory Tower. This was a solitary building, like one of the ‘Follies’ created at view-spots by numberless owners of country-places throughout the land; only this was the more foolish in that it commemorated nobody and commanded no view, but that of three drives cut through the flat Broadham woods, now leafless—which drives, narrowing in perspective, ended in grey cloud.

One Digges baronet, of astronomical as-

pirations, had erected it with a view to becoming that rarity, a scientific squire. But he died before his hobby had been completed, and his successor turned it into a dining-room for such pic-nicking neighbours as did not care to sit tailor-fashion on wet grass, and find grasshoppers in their champagne, and other strange little beasties in their food. It was in a solitary situation about half-a-mile from the house. The basement story was occupied by a worthy couple, whom in my late walks with Amy Pawlett we had already come to know ; but the upper door, reached by steps and leading to the visitors' round room, was always unlocked by day to shelter any chance guest.

Here I was sitting on that gray winter afternoon waiting with frightened expectancy ; fearful of my own daring ; and so heart-sick

that I should almost have snatched at any chance of fleeing from the interview I had sought with such difficulty. The room was stiff, cheerless and cold ; so that, wrapped in furs though I was, it seemed to freeze the very heart and soul in me. The floor was inlaid in wood, in a wavy pattern that arrested my eyes perforce ; and it was worm-eaten here and there. How distinctly I remembered later every detail ! The furniture consisted of a few chairs, rudely carved, just enough so to be uncomfortable without being ornamental ; an octagonal dining-table ; and some stags' heads between the three, tall, prospectless windows.

I was sitting away from the windows, too proud to appear watching—yet with my heart going pit-a-pat so often it would have been an intense relief to do *anything*. Five times

already my watch had been consulted, put to my ear in doubt, as it told, surely lyingly ! that only twenty minutes had crept miserably by in the world's history and my small life—otherwise, I forced myself to be still. Oh, Clair, Clair, what a valley of trouble, misty doubts and heart-aches, you had led my life down into since last summer ; when it had been so free of care, its horizon golden with the fair hopes of my age.

The door below was all at once opened and clanged to. There came the sound of a man's step up the stone staircase ; and I turned the more pallid and cold with apprehension, for having forced on this interview. Yes ! while meaning to offer Clair his absolute freedom, the fear that all *might* be broken off so filled me with trembling, that it seemed a thousand times better *now !* to have gone on

clinging to indefinite hopes—even so long as he chose to let me suffer.

Into these few seconds, a world of agony was compressed.

The door opened—and Fulke Bracy appeared on the threshold.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT I said or did, on Fulke Bracy's unexpected appearance, I do not know ; but my great surprise must have been only too evident, since he stopped short—came forward a few steps—hesitated, then asked, ‘ Has there been any mistake ? I understood that you were expecting me—that is, that you wished me to come here and meet you.’

‘ You, Mr. Bracy !—*I never wished to see you !*’

‘ What ! Then what did Mrs. Jessop mean ?’

‘Mrs. Jessop ! *What* did she say ?’

‘She told me—or at least certainly gave me to understand—that you were going to walk by yourself to the tower here ; and that when your little interview was over, you would no doubt like, she said, to have our companionship home.’

‘My interview !’—I stammered : then sat down on a chair, feeling white to my very lips, and absolutely incapable of standing if I wished to preserve an appearance of self-possession. A sudden intelligence lightened Fulke Bracy’s eyes, and stepping near me he uttered, almost unawares :

‘You *were* coming to meet some one else, then ? I beg your pardon for saying so—but, indeed, you may trust me as a friend, Miss Pleasance.’

‘What did Mrs. Jessop say ? What do

you mean by my interview?' were my faltering replies--being so new to deception I never dreamt of denial.

'I don't know what Mrs. Jessop meant. *I* only thought you were bound on an errand of mercy to the old couple below-stairs; for they told me the other day, when I came round here and was chatting to them, how good you were in trying to cure them of rheumatism and other ailments. But, for goodness sake, come outside now'—as I sat still; motionless; and incapable of understanding what to do, it seemed, in this emergency—Come! quick—command yourself; make an effort, do! It is impossible for you to stay now, for Mrs. Jessop and Sir John Dudgeon are waiting below-stairs for us.'

At his tone of earnest rousing remonstrance I rose up hastily, and feeling turned to stone

followed down the staircase, whilst my good friend of childhood's days led the way ; once or twice turning to look rather anxiously towards me.

Arrived at the outer door, which ended the winding stairs, he turned the handle, but the door did not open ; again—but still in vain ! next more violently he shook and tried it in every way. It seemed to me then that a suppressed laugh was heard outside ; certainly, there was the hurried sound of departing footsteps, for Bracy exclaimed,

‘They have locked us in !’ Springing upstairs, he tried to see out of the loopholed window that lit the stair,—but it was too high ! Then he rushed back into the round room, where I followed him. From the window nearest the door, we just caught a glimpse of the widow and Sir John Dudgeon

escaping across the open greensward around the tower, evidently in convulsions of laughter at the exquisite result of their joke. Mr. Bracy tried to throw up the window-sash to call out ; but utterly in vain. Either damp or carpenter's handiwork had hermetically sealed it.

Just then, a short active figure in a well-known light-coloured suit was distinguishable, emerging alone from some side path in the wood, and entering the broad grass drive, down which Sir John and Mrs. Jessop were retreating. It was Clair St. Leger. I should have known him even at twice the distance. By his forward bending I felt, rather than saw, that Bracy beside me was watching the result, too, earnestly ; but what was that to my anxious eagerness of gaze ? Yet, while straining my eyes, I still was sufficiently aware of his presence to control

myself. The three figures met: there seemed a short consultation,—next slowly, as with a doubtful air, or so I fancied, although they were too far off to distinguish much in reality, Clair turned and went with them. But it was not too far to see that he walked alone, keeping a yard or so away from the widow; flicking at the dead brambles and underwood with his stick as he went; whilst Sir John Dudgeon, on the contrary, went gaily close by her side. Then they disappeared into the wood.

When they were quite gone, and not till then, Fulke Bracy and I turned, meeting each other's eyes full. Moved by a quick pitying impulse, and forgetting I was no longer the little girl he used to know, he kindly said,

‘This is too bad. It is a shameful hoax—but don't mind, like a good child; and it

will all come right ! St. Leger could not well help himself ; after meeting them. It would have exposed you to all sorts of unkind remarks. . . .'

' Oh, don't ! for pity's sake,' as, utterly breaking down at his words—first moved by his kindness, and then conjuring up all the scandal and evil speaking that might follow—I covered my face with both hands, weeping and shamefaced, and leant on the table beside which I had sunk down on a chair.

' What have I said ? *don't* cry any more ! ' reiterated Fulke, greatly moved by my trouble, and at once thinking himself to blame for it. ' I only meant to say, they might have guessed something—but they could not have *known* anything, so don't make yourself so unhappy.'

' They will all know ; you knew ! That

woman, Mrs. Jessop, she will make a good story of it, and tell *every one!*' I uttered in desperation, raising streaming eyes to his face.

'She shall not! I will stop her doing that.'

'You! But how could you stop her? Ah! you don't know her. You need put no trust in her good nature.'

'Heaven forbid. I do know her well; even better than you,' was Bracy's forcible answer. 'For that very reason, I can make her hold her peace; as I remember certain stories about herself she might not care to have told.'

'But indeed, indeed, I don't believe you would blame me if—if only you understood all about it!' I pleaded; horrified at seeming such a culprit; 'for I have been so miserable; and it has seemed so impossible to meet in the

house. Still, I did want to know how things really stood—if even all is to be broken off . . .’ and at that, unable to finish, my head sank down again, and sobs shook me like a reed in spite of strongest endeavours.

‘Blame you! that I feel sure I never should,’ exclaimed Bracy’s voice nearer overhead, in warm indignation. ‘Poor child! I thought there was some engagement, last autumn, the night of your ball; but why all this secrecy and trouble about it? Surely your parents—Your father is so kind; he would consent, if you only tell him.’

‘But I am not to tell him; at least not just yet,’ I replied low and small. Then, as a murmur of suppressed astonishment came almost equally low from Fulke Bracy’s lips, I sat more upright, and hurriedly, in broken words, explained the matter; why or in

what manner I did not think, except feeling that now it was best he should know the whole reason of my being here—and that he was an old friend, and one to be trusted. Although this last was a very woman's reason, considering how little we had really met since Dartmoor days,

'I think '*him* ' so, because I think '*him* ' so.'

From impulse, or secret sympathy, or whatever other hidden cause, I had always looked upon Bracy as my especial friend; and being a middle-aged man—quite an *old* man, so I mentally phrased it—one to be confided in. In fact, my feeling for him was like what Hazlitt wishes for himself: 'I would have my friends love me as I love myself, without any reason.' It was not that he had ever singled me out, or flattered

or admired me; as had Clair, who thus taught me first to love him.

‘So I am free, in a manner—though *he* considered himself bound! And he meant to get some work to do for my sake, as he was so poor. But since we came here, he seems to care as much for Mrs. Jessop’s society as mine,’ I ended low, in bitterness of soul.

‘Poor child!—*Poor Pleasance!*’ burst out Fulke; then remembering he had used my name in his heat familiarly, and being a very punctilious man on the score of invariable courtesy, he reddened in a way I should have almost thought impossible at his age under my momentarily surprised gaze.

Looking out of the window, and with his face sternly set, as he now sat opposite me, he went on quietly; but with decided, if subdued, emphasis: ‘Of course, it is

not my place to set myself up as judge in this particular case. Still a man—in my opinion—ought to know his own mind before he commits himself so far in gaining the affections of any girl. Surely St. Leger is not so badly off either, if he only chose to retrench! . . I know,' (speaking more softly and slowly) 'I should be sorry to do as he is doing.'

'Don't abuse him. I will not have him spoken against like that!' I hotly cried, flaring out in unreasonable wrath upon my own defender. 'No doubt you have led such a different hardworking life of business, that you can't be expected to enter into his feelings. But he was brought up to do nothing at all; in every comfort, if not luxury, in his own country house—and was left his own master quite young. And he

loved sport, and—and everything of that kind; no wonder! when he is so good at it. So it must seem more hard on him now than for others not to have the means to live as he would like.'

No answer. My friend and mentor had raised his eyebrows ever so slightly, then compressed his lips, but did not speak.

'Please, don't be offended with me!' I continued in my foolishness, still excited, but recognizing his goodness. 'Remember, you are so much older a man. Perhaps at his age, you might have felt too as he does about his enjoyments.'

Bracy turned round upon me and smiled, as if despite himself.

'What appalling age do you take me to be? Why, I am only five years older than St. Leger! No matter for that; but you

are a woman, a very woman ! asking sympathy when you are hardly treated, and then—when with my whole heart I am sorry for you and honestly say so—you turn upon and rend me.'

Ashamed of myself, I began stammering excuses and protestations. Verily, as the old saying goes, lovers in their quarrels are like the blades of a pair of scissors ; apart now, but ready to close on whoever tries to interpose between them. But Fulke Bracy interrupted me, to continue with a humourous yet reproachful smile :

' Wait, please, Miss Pleasance. There is one more thing I never expected you to say, after all your kind sympathy with my sentimental feelings the night of your ball—when I saw Stoke, my own former old home, again. When you speak of the difference between

me and St. Leger, do you forget that I was brought up in my own country place too? I was led to expect an inheritance, which I may say without conceit would have been considerably greater than his? And I cannot believe, as to tastes, that any lad then, or many men now, could care for a country gentleman's life and all its pursuits and pleasures more than I did—*and do!*'

He rose, as if disturbed at the recollection, and walked to the window. His tone was so different from what I had been used to, (because, for the first time almost since I knew him, not occupied with others' wants or wishes, but revealing his feelings about himself,) that my eyes seemed opened as they looked after him.

Only five years older than Clair, too! My old friend, Mr. Fulke—not so old after all!

My eyes seemed unsealed from their childish silliness of judgment on our first meeting, and from love's selfishness later. In this new light, I took quite a new mental survey of my friend.

He was certainly taller than most men, and broader; becoming just a little heavy in build perhaps, which was pleasing enough as he was not *stout*. He carried his head with an especially high air too, although such a kindly grey-eyed man. Truly—it must be confessed—his hair, that was fair or light-brownish, *was* growing decidedly thin on the crown of his well-shapen head. But with that same excellent gift of a finely-outlined cranium, what does slight baldness matter?

Altogether, thus seeing him with enlightened vision, I could not but own Fulke Bracy did look the very type of an English

country gentleman. He was a true heir of the long line of Bracys who had been born and bred at Stoke, ruling there as thanes from the days of Athelstan till their fair Saxon heiress married a Norman knight ; after which an unbroken manly line of stout and proud country squires had succeeded each other, father and son—till the summer morning when this last of them bade farewell for ever to his pleasant home of Stoke. For, on the evening before, we Browns had entered into our new possession.

With the curious sympathy of thought often experienced between two persons in company, Bracy a moment after raised his head and uttered aloud : ‘ Yes ; it did seem a terrible wrench to see the last of the dear old place. Do you remember how I leaped the garden wall, early that morning when you

discovered me? I shall never forget my thoughts as I went away through the fields and woods, where every leaf and blade of grass seemed to know me. The most money-making business seemed only vile drudgery in my eyes that morning, except as a means to . . .' He stopped abruptly; then said after a short pause: 'But, now, we must see how to get out of this place. Cheer up; it is not likely yet to prove a Ugolino's tower, and believe me' (kindly) 'you have nothing else to fear. So, don't look so dejected.'

'I am not dejected now, Mr. Bracy; you are such a good friend to me.'

'Then you must not look so woebegone still. Yours is one of the most honest faces I know; for it tells all your thoughts in a way you hardly dream of—to any one with discerning eyes.'

‘No ; does it really ?’ I exclaimed in dismay, involuntarily putting up my hands to conceal the traitorous features. Fulke Bracy laughed.

‘Don’t be alarmed. You have only good and kind thoughts to show. There ! that is a compliment for you, and what is more, I *mean it*. But now, how to get out of this place ? The windows are rather too high to jump out of,—and he measured the distance to the ground with his eye.

‘Don’t think of it ! You would be killed,’ I cried in horror. ‘No, no ; let us go downstairs. The old couple below are gone to afternoon service in the schoolhouse, but we might find another key.’

‘Come then,’ said Bracy, glad to rouse me ; but alas ! in all the trim little kitchen, neither in drawers nor dresser, among the brightly-

scrubbed coppers and tins, or in any of the several old teapots, into each of which I carefully peeped, was any key to be seen. We were fast shut in.

I looked at Fulke without his being aware of it ; and was almost surprised to see how grave he was, his brows bent together, while he gnawed the tip of his moustache.

‘ After all, it does not so greatly matter. They will soon come to let us out ; and they cannot say much about my being here with you,’ was my next remark, by way of pretending a cheerfulness far from real.

He grimly smiled.

‘ Is that a tribute to respectable age or my well-known good character ? However, I quite agree with you, that it *would* be hard, indeed, if any unkind remarks were made upon us after being the victims of such a bad

joke. Well, at least you can be warm here instead of shivering up-stairs. Won't you sit down ?'

He placed a chair for me by the fire ; but I had an uneasy conviction that he was far from being as assured in his own mind as he tried to seem. For some little time he moved restlessly around the small round room, playing with the caged linnet hung in the window, examining the thumbed Bible on its sill. Finally, seating himself in the old man's corner-chair, he eyed the coals silently. For me, I was too oppressed with a returning sense of my own frustrated plan, and all the trouble and fears roused thereby making sick turmoil in my brain, to care to speak. Half-an-hour passed in this silence, each occupied with our own thoughts.

It was a strange scene.

At last, feeling I *must* rouse, and that my companion was respecting my preoccupation of mind—I sat upright, saying in a tired voice that *would not* sound light :

‘It seems too bad you should lose your afternoon’s walk, to be shut up here in dulness with me.’

‘Don’t say that—’ returned Fulke; speaking so fluently and immediately that, unless his whole silence had been taken up in thinking of my concerns, it would have been impossible he should have answered so—as struck me afterwards; though at the time in my selfishness it seemed natural enough.

‘Don’t think so! For I am only too glad you should have thought me worthy of confidence to-day; although unfortunately there seems so little chance of my being able to help—and yet it might be possible.’ This

slowly and musingly. Then rousing up :
‘ Well, where there is a will there is a way, is nearly always true ; and if a man is in earnest about anything, surely he ought to be so about this.’

‘ You mean—Mr. St. Leger ! ’

‘ Of course I do. Good heavens ! when one thinks of it ! . . . Your happiness to be perhaps sacrificed, at least trembling in the balance, whilst some other men would be so gladly in his shoes . . . ’ I looked up utterly startled, and he went on almost roughly :

‘ Yes ; there is one honest fellow, at least— you may think little of him because of his plain outward appearance, but I can answer for his real goodness of heart : and his mother would welcome you with the greatest joy. Pleasance !—As you are not really engaged,

will you not think twice of this? With John Gladman you would at any rate have the assurance of a happy home. . . ’

‘ *John Gladman!*’ my voice echoed, in a tone of intense astonishment. ‘ *He* want to marry me? What an absurd idea! His mother was always fond of me, certainly; and I love her dearly . . . so I suppose she has advised him, and he has obediently made up his mind to ask me. Or, no!—he is much more likely to ask *you* to do so for him.’

I had hit the mark. My old friend looked so conscious, and played nervously with his watch-chain. He only returned:

‘ Would it be anything so very strange if he had so commissioned a friend?’

‘ It would! Imagine respecting—marrying a man who had not courage to speak for himself!’ cried I, blushing and laughing.

‘ It is all nonsense ; indeed it is, Mr. Bracy. He likes me in an every-day way very likely ; but beyond that he cares for me no more than you do.’

‘ Who, I?—oh, I am only your aged counsellor, your venerable mentor and faithful servitor. Pray don’t speak as if I was young enough for any woman ever to care for me, *now*,’ answered Bracy, with a rather forced, inappropriate laugh, as it seemed to me. Then springing to his feet, he began pacing up and down, like any lion in a Zoo.

Clearly my ‘ venerable mentor and faithful servitor ’ was offended. But how or why was utterly dark to me, in the innocence of my heart. Quite sorry and puzzled, I was hesitating—ready to rush into apologies, but really not knowing what to say—when the noise of the tower - door being violently

opened was heard. Then Sir Dudley's voice shouting, and himself following, came down the stairs.

' Bracy, hi ! I say — Bracy ! Pleasance ! Pleasance Brown, are you there ? . . Now, then,—what the devil is the meaning of this ? '

CHAPTER XI.

MY brother-in-law's manner was so rough, not to say churlish, that I shrank back under his gaze ; being unhappily not conscious of perfect innocence.

But Fulke Bracy was not the man, and less than ever in a mood now, to allow himself to be treated in an overbearing manner by any one—even by his host. He answered in as high a tone as Sir Dudley's own, like a masterful man, who simply cannot suppose that his rightful actions are capable of misconstruction ; yet with a haughty gentleness, in deference to my presence, as he turned

courteously to me twice while speaking, that made me look up to him in admiration. My brother-in-law only seemed to think of me as a young woman towards whom he had a family right to be rude if it pleased him. However, being a little of a bully and easily cowed by *men*—besides, not otherwise a bad fellow at heart—the evident blame which had been black on his brow subsided visibly as Mr. Bracy explained rather angrily—and by no means apologetically—our presence in the tower.

Then we went homewards. What an uncomfortable walk it was !

Sir Dudley never spoke to me once ; showing plainly I was in disfavour. And though he certainly did converse with his other companion on the subject of farming in general, especially the top-dressing of certain poor

land we passed, it was in a dogged way—as if he forced his brief sentences out through his bushy beard from no liking, but only a difficult effort at politeness.

Fulke Bracy talked to me as often as the drift in the discourse would allow. But my heart was too heavy to respond, and my brain too full of fears that my secret would soon be known to all Broadhams. If they knew that I had gone to meet Clair—if—if they did! I groaned within myself. Oh the laughter, the jeers!

Yet, withal, I drew myself together to face the worst of the gossip and malicious mirth which might ensue.

‘I think Alice is waiting in her boudoir. She wants to speak to you,’ muttered Sir Dudley to me aside, as we arrived at the door: though not so delicately but that Mr.

Bracy overheard him, for he gave me a quick look of real pity.

‘Yes?—I was going to see her in any case,’ was my quiet reply, given with apparently perfect self-possession.

Alice certainly was ‘waiting for me;’ for she was sitting alone; apparently busied ‘nursing her wrath to keep it warm.’ Her pretty cheeks were aflame as if they were dyed dark red; while her glittering eyes showed she was in such a rage—surpassing far the little tempers we knew so well in her as—made me at the door suddenly stop, though keeping my ground.

‘Well, Miss!—so there you are! Oh, *you are back*—are you really? Well, I *should* like,—I *should* very much like to know what you have got to say for yourself!’ she reiterated. Plainly her anger was so impossible to put

into words, that she hardly knew what she said, with an attempt at sarcasm that would have been ludicrous but that to me it was so painful. Then, as I began to try and comply with her request for information; trying my best to be calm, she burst in violently: ‘Oh, *don’t* talk to me! . . . If you imagine I mean to allow any such fastness in *my* house you are very much mistaken.’

(Oh, stern shades of propriety! You to be invoked at Broadhams!—and by Alice.)

‘All I can say is, Pleasance, that I am thankful papa and mamma are coming to-morrow; and then they may look after you, for your conduct is, really, *too disgraceful!*’

‘Alice! you have no right to speak in this way to me. You *don’t*—you cannot think that it was my doing! being—being—shut up with Mr. Bracy; it was all Mrs. Jessop’s

trick,' I entreated earnestly yet stammering. For the sense of being truly guilty of another appointment was heavy on me, if innocent of this one.

'Yes, I do!' retorted my sister with only increasing vehemence. 'As Jenny Jessop said, she was sure you *wanted him*; and so she thought she would give you both a dose of it. Pray! would no other man in the house suit you to flirt with, but my friend?'

'Hush, hush, Alice—your maid is in your bed-room, and she can hear every word,' I hastily whispered, looking towards an open door, horror-stricken at Alice's imprudence; and yet with my heart so suddenly lightened of its greatest fear I could have laughed. For Mrs. Jessop had not told—whatever she knew.

‘I don’t care ! You might have taken any other man in the house, if you had only left him alone,’ cried Alice, with strong symptoms of coming hysterics. Then stamping her foot, as I rushed to her side with consolation and sisterly caresses :

‘Oh ! go away out of my sight ! Go !—go out of the room !’

So I went. She never had cared much to have me with her when vexed, even in former days ; declaring she could not then bear persons who were calm like me, and did not get angry too—but now what a change for the worse ! I went slowly and very sadly away, feeling that this marriage had, in a few months, terribly changed our still not less beloved family beauty.

That evening I did not come down-stairs till the dinner-gong sounded ; shrinking from

possible jokes at my expense, for no doubt Mrs. Jessop had told half the large house-party of her practical joke. But as I slipped into the drawing-room gently, Mr. Bracy, who was standing close to the door, made way for me. Then he said with an impassive face, and in an ordinary tone of voice, no one else being near: ‘It is all right; I have silenced her.’

Next instant Sir Dudley hustled me away; asking some unimportant question with a most important face. But Clair, whom they did not suspect, lounged past me, and never even looking my way just murmured so that I caught it: ‘It was not my fault to-day!—you would forgive me if you knew.’

They guarded me at dinner between Lady Pawlett and my brother-in-law, who glanced at me occasionally, as if I was a

monstrous specimen of fast young ladyhood that needed close watching.

Feeling sore and bitter against my natural guardians and having been sent in alone, I watched Clair furtively—whose hard-set expression made my worst fears return. Rose had told me, with sympathetic grief in her pretty face, what ‘a lot of money’ she heard Clair had lost the night before. This was after my return that evening, when I had imparted to her the mortifying tale of my imprisonment in the tower and Alice’s wrath. Dear child, we were both very young in our troubles, but to whom should sisters turn for consolation if not to each other; and her fresh unworldliness was as water to my thirsty soul—conscious almost every one else in this house would have thought my attachment to St. Leger a sentimental folly?

After dinner, Alice said sharply to the other ladies ; being evidently still much out of tune : ‘ There is no use in going through that farce of going to the drawing-room. The men will be out directly, and I suppose some of you will be wanting your revenge ; so let us go straight to the billiard-room.’

Most of her friends followed her ; but there was a little ante-room before the billiard-room, dedicated to newspapers, and here I stopped short. Rose, who was singularly silent and grave this wretched Sunday night, stayed beside me, whispering :

‘ Shall you sit here if they play cards ? —then so will I.’

For the first time, she seemed to consider me her wisest guide here. Our schoolroom child had had no London season as yet, and was shocked at what she thought a

violation of the day ; much as she and I had dearly loved stealing away from my mother's rather pharisaical keeping of the Jewish law, to have a romp, or a ramble in the woods with Bob and the dogs. We were both silently turning over the pages of the 'World,' 'Truth,' 'Whitehall,' and so forth, when the Pawlett girls joined us—Charlotte with some books, Amy with an uncomfortable expression.

'Is *that* what you are reading ?' asked the former in a hollow voice, at which we started. Charlotte had made gigantic strides, almost past belief, in her religious fervour during the last few days ; her soul vexed by the new wickedness of Broadhams.

Rose and I felt meekly ashamed of ourselves. At home our mother, certainly, went round the house every Sunday morning

sweeping newspapers and all light literature into grim cupboards, of which, as of the library bookcases, she kept the keys, leaving instead copies around of the Sunday periodicals (in which we, of course, only read the moral novels). But, to-night, I felt so revengeful, unhappy, and distraught in mind, that *anything* to divert my thoughts was a boon ; and by her unusually troubled, small face Rose seemed to think so too. ‘Here is “Thomas à Kempis” for you,’ said Charlotte to me solemnly, ‘and for you, Rose, Keble’s . . .’

‘Never could endure poetry ! The only piece I remember, now, of all those my governesses taught me by the hundred, is :

“ You may not love a roasted fowl,
But you may love a screaming owl.”

It was called “Loving and Liking.” Thank

you, Charlotte, but I'd rather sit here and think,' responded Rose, shutting up her mouth into a tight, little, red button, and crossing her arms.

' And where may not your thoughts wander to, unless you discipline them; as, for instance, by first reading and then meditating ? ' pursued Charlotte still more severely, evidently ready to begin a prolonged discussion.

' Don't bother, please ; for I am too tired to read, really—and besides I won't,' answered our spoilt youngest one, as if that settled the matter, adding with a roguish smile :

' If you do want to preach, why not go into the next room, where your mamma and Mrs. Jessop are playing double-dummy whist to keep their hands in ? '

' Rose ; how can you ? Charlotte, don't think of such a thing as interfering with

mamma,' exclaimed Amy in prescient horror, as well she might. For, on hearing this news, Charlotte started, with rather a stage thrill that seemed to run up her spine and end in a violent sniff—looked fixedly at the open door, then at Rose, as if the latter had been the unconscious agent of a divine command!—again at the door—and finally, her mind made up, went towards the latter swiftly with a working face and clenched hands, though her arms hung limply by her side.

With a little cry of horror, poor Amy darted after her; feebly trying to hold back the resolved martyr. Rose and I, meanwhile, waited for the result with appalled looks at each other. In a few seconds, we were aware of a lull in the feminine hum in the other room, through which Charlotte's voice sounded indistinctly and curiously—low and forced—

a self-frightened latter-day prophetess. *Then!* came Lady Pawlett's voice raised in passion ; with a loud jeering laugh from Mrs. Jessop. A minute afterwards our unfortunate friend reappeared, led away swiftly by Lady Pawlett ; who, whilst Amy still followed with even more despairing looks, clutched her daughter firmly by the wrist. The contrast had never been stronger between the handsome, splendidly-robed mother and the plain, skimpily-skirted daughter—for whom nature, art, and parents had done so little ; and who passed now with the resigned look of one who suffers for conscience' sake.

‘It is a pity your new ideas don't teach you to honour your parents, but I suppose that is too old-fashioned !’ said the mother, with the glaring eye of a virtuous Roman matron.

‘They do ; and that is why I warned you in all duty and lovingness,’ sighed Charlotte.

‘Hold your tongue, and get to your own room !’ hissed Lady Pawlett at the door ; now thinking herself out of earshot and becoming instantly a very virago.

They all began gambling in the next room then, as soon as the gentlemen came in. Sir Dudley, holding a short conference with Alice in our little ante-room, did certainly offer an objection. ‘It seems not quite the right thing on account of these girls—eh ? ’

‘The girls !!’ echoed Alice contemptuously. ‘Oh, if *they* never did worse than play cards on a Sunday evening. . . ’ She glanced towards me as she spoke, curling her short upper lip as if my depths of iniquity that day

had taught her more of evil ways than ever she knew before ; and soon Rose and I alone had the newspapers to ourselves.

Not quite alone, though ; for Mr. Bracy by-and-by lounged in from the next room with a scientific-looking review in his hand, and sat down in silence near us. He had hardly done so, however, when Sir Dudley followed close, looking as important as a guardian of public morals, and very cross at his self-imposed office.

‘ Don’t you smoke ? ’ he surlily asked, addressing himself to Bracy as if growling at him.

‘ Not yet ; thanks,’ returned the other, perhaps from consideration for Rose and myself.

‘ If you do want to, don’t mind the young ladies,’ politely continued our brother-in-law,

and then began puffing like a starting steam-engine beside me, in silence.

It was very disagreeable ; that is, not the smoke, though Sir Dudley tacitly insisted on sitting glued to my side ; but the impression of being distrusted, and of restraint. Rose and I exchanged glances furtively, and by-and-by, as soon as we could rise without seeming offended, retired softly from the ante-room, with a murmured good-night, to our own rooms. Here—it must be owned—though with a feeling of relief at being at peace at last, I wept again a little over all the vexations of this unfortunate Sunday.

Rose pitied me, consoled, and occasionally in a most feeling way wiped her own eyes. She hated Mrs. Jessop now as cordially as I did. She would not leave me that night ; but came and slept, too, in a small portion,

as suited her size, of my enormous bed built for the Titans. We two felt so deserted, so lonely in that great house.

Silently, not to keep poor Rose waking longer, I grieved myself into fitful unconsciousness through the long cold hours of that wintry night. But then bad dreams roused me to waking trouble of mind, that could not free itself enough from shackles of sleep to do more than go round and round, in puzzled pain, thinking what Clair could mean—what others might mean!—till with pure weariness and turmoil the brain wandered back again into the broken, objectless visions of sleep.

CHAPTER XII.

IN the cold grey morning a candle was flashed in our faces. We both started up, rubbing our eyes sleepily, and thinking it was still the middle of the night.

To our alarm, Alice stood shivering in her dressing-gown, with a light in one hand and a long telegram in the other.

‘Do rouse up ! and read this from mother,’ she sharply said. ‘Father is ill ! and can’t come to-day, it seems. They gave me such a dreadful fright just now ; waking me with a message at such an unearthly hour ; so, once I was up, I thought I might as well let you

both know. And it's so cold ; ugh ! isn't it too bad ?'

Alice crouched down upon our bed, shivering as she spoke, pulling the counterpane and what blankets she could get round her. I had already snatched the telegram, and was devouring it with confused, frightened eyes ; Rose peering over my shoulder and holding the candle.

At first, it did not seem so very alarming. ' Father had had a bad attack on Friday ; but fearing to alarm us, mother had delayed writing. He was not well enough to come yet. She herself had slight rheumatism, so could not nurse him properly, and had wired for Bob.' ' Don't wish to spoil girls' pleasure by sending for them,' it ended. But—as we remained silent a few moments, except for interjections—

on studying the words closer I grew more foreboding.

‘A “bad attack” ! Mother never would say that unless it was *really* bad ; she makes so light of all illness,’ I mused aloud.

‘Yes ; and fancy her allowing any one else to wait upon *him* !’ ejaculated Rose by my side. For, as we all knew—upon the rare occasions of old when father had any little ache or ailment, and in the occasional tired fits he could not always successfully conceal from us since some months—mother had always been strangely jealous of any of us her children doing for him any of those little loving duties she considered her especial right. Rose added with the sapient air of a privileged child, as she was :

‘And mother has had rheumatism in her arm all the winter. I know : for one day I

found her rubbing it, but she said I must say nothing about it. Unless it was worse, she would never send for Bob.'

'Poor mamma! Yes, she never thinks of herself; and now that *I* am gone none of you look after her. This is too hard on her; just when she was coming to me for her first visit,' grumbled Alice pityingly. With Alice and Beau our mother was always the favourite parent; but then these two eldest were her swans, and Beaumanoirs.

Nevertheless, at Alice's assumption of superior filial virtue, Rose and I felt nettled; for what had she ever done more for our mother than we had? Far, far less, indeed! Like the son in the parable, saying, 'I go, sir,' she—on the rare occasions when mother asked her to give a message, or any little help, instead of us—went not; though she

would indeed give answer a merry ‘yes,’ sure immediately afterwards in a lazy laughing way to bid one of us do it instead, averring—
‘It is all the same thing.’

‘Well, I’m going now. If you’ve nothing to say, you need not keep me here in the cold any longer,’ Alice now ended, crossly enough, rising as she spoke. ‘I do declare it is too bad. I thought we should have had a pleasant party when you two came here ; and instead of that everything has gone wrong. It is enough to disgust one of having girls in the house !’

‘Well—I like that ! As if we were to blame for poor dear father not being well !’ exclaimed Rose, hotly ; but I interrupted, speaking almost in the same breath.

‘Hush, Rose, dear. Yes, Alice, I have something to say : that is, that I will go home at once—to-day.’

‘Well . . . if you think you ought, of course . . . perhaps you had better—I would hardly like to stop you. But there is no such immediate hurry,’ answered Lady Diggles, hesitatingly and more graciously; adding some few expressions of apparent unwillingness to lose my society that made me suddenly think, with a great surprised flash of insight and anger, that she, my sister, was *glad* I should leave her house! Fired at the thought, I sprang the next instant out of bed, and began hurriedly dressing myself.

‘There is every need for haste,’ said I, trying to speak softly and not too coldly; for, after all, Alice had a right to choose her own guests. ‘When does the next train go, I wonder; and what o’clock is it now?’

‘About eight, dear; only with the shutters closed it seems so much earlier, and it is

raining hard, and such a dark morning,' said Alice, creeping to peer out and drawing shivering breath. 'Well, I'll send my maid to find out about your train, and order a carriage if you think you *must* go; so now I may as well go back to bed again. Tell mother I'm so dreadfully sorry; and mind you write. . . . Why, Rose, what are you dressing for?'

'I'm going too, of course.'

'But of course you are doing nothing of the sort! You are under my charge here! and without mamma's permission I shall certainly not let you stir,' sharply returned our elder sister.

In vain Rose protested with all her warm little heart, and even cried. Alice was inflexible; and I, being accused of selfishness when venturing interference, was silenced.

We both had to submit ; knowing that indeed all the maternal authority was considered vested in Lady Digges's hands. And we were somewhat afraid of meeting our mother, even though we went home to help her, if Alice wrote this was against her wishes.

What a hurried packing it was ! and what hasty consultations Rose and I held in whispers, not to be overheard by our maid ! The poor child promised to write me faithfully everything that occurred in the house —of course, this entirely or almost solely referred to Clair St. Leger. And then we repeated often to each other, regretfully, but still with hopeful assurance :

‘ Of course father’s attack *can’t* be very much ; oh no, of course not !—he will soon be better.’

One has such a feeling in first youth that

severe illness, or great trouble, may come to others ; but that nothing so extraordinary can happen to *ourselves*.

‘ It does seem so hard of fate that you have to go now, my poor Pleasance,’ uttered Rose, looking at me as if such a martyr’s sacrifice was unprecedented in her short experience.

‘ Yes ; but it must be done,’ I answered with a heavy heart.

Surely, surely, if Clair cared for me at all, my going home to do my duty would not make him care for me less. ‘ Absence makes the heart grow fonder.’ He might be sorry, then, that he had not tried more to talk to me last night ; not that in any bitterness of my own heart I *wished* him to be sorry—but that as he had not been quite kind to me, it might reunite us.

A hurried breakfast was laid for me at a side-table in the great dining-room. One or two of the earlier guests, learning my departure, came in a really kind way to express their regret ; among these Lord Pawlett, who, shaking me quite earnestly by the hand, said he would go and tell Amy. He was sure Amy did not know ; and—ahem ! Amy was very fond of me. It was the first evidence he had ever given me of having a soul of his own or thoughts of his daughters apart from his wife. Next, Fulke Bracy hastened in to say farewell with the truest sympathy and friendly feeling both for me and father. A few hopeful, earnest words of good speed were all he said—what more could be said ? —but they so cheered and warmed my heart that I felt quite strong after them. Afterwards, when dressed for the journey, I came

into the outer hall a few minutes later with Rose, I found him again waiting to see me off.

Just then Mrs. Jessop also appeared ; and, giving a little feigned start at sight of him, ther maliciou sly whispered :

‘ Poor Miss Brown !—I thought it would be so solitary if none of us came to say good-bye, that here I am—but I hope I am not *de trop*, my dear ! ’

‘ I don’t know what you mean,’ was all I could say, looking full at her.

Oh, stupid, stupid Pleasance !—surely no presence of mind or mother wit was ever mine ; ten minutes later, too late, in the carriage, what a number of brilliant answers suggested themselves tantalizingly to my mind.

She answered with a sly smile : ‘ Come here

aside, my dear, a moment till I say something. . . . Well, good-bye; I *hope* your father will be better very soon—it hardly seems necessary that you should run away in this *very* sudden manner, does it? And—one last piece of advice, if I may offer it as a friend—don't blot *billets-doux* in future *on fresh blotting-paper!*'

She had sprung back as if afraid I should tear her to pieces; then ran, with an affectedly girlish wave of the hand for such a buxom woman, through the doorway, before I could even utter the quick indignant exclamation that was on my tongue. Rose was at my side inquiringly in a moment. Fulke Bracy looked at us both questioningly. Whether he had guessed, or overheard, I knew not; but anyhow he shook my hand in a specially comforting, protecting way. Next

down rushed Amy, just when my foot was on the carriage-step. She threw herself on my neck literally, and wept in an ashamed, ungainly way. Poor soul ! her eyes indeed looked as if she had been crying all night, and so beginning afresh was nothing strange. Then I was off.

Putting my head out of the window to look back at the dull house, in the dull damp park, as I was driven down the ugly drive, it seemed to me as if my time there had been like a bad dream. All the way back, it seemed to me so strange to have looked forward for long weeks to our Broadhams visit with such happy anticipations ; and now —to go home like this !

It was perhaps well for me that the journey lasted nearly all day, for by afternoon I was dulled and stupefied to deadness ; if my state

of thought and feeling could not be called by the higher name of resignation.

It was evening when the train stopped at our home station, and there was Bob's dear face grinning in greeting.

'It's all right!—the governor looks nearly as well as ever again; and, what's more, he's outside there in the carriage.'

So he exclaimed, running along by the side of the train before it stopped, putting his head in at the window at the peril of his neck, and jerking his thumb over his shoulder in his usual free-and-easy style. Then when I got out :

'Oh, I say, isn't this jolly? You and I home again, and no cramming to do for a blessed week—(week! see if I don't make it a fortnight)—nothing to do but to coddle the dear old dad, and can't we

two just do that ! Eh ? . . . Here *she* is !—
Here *he* is !'

There was my father in the brougham ; welcoming me in *almost* the same hearty voice, and with just the same loving eyes, as of old. It was only after an affectionate hug, on sitting down beside him, that I noticed the dear ruddy face was paler, *greyer*, and that his grizzled head hung slightly forward a little heavily.

' Let us be off soon, dear ; for I have some important business awaiting me which obliged me to come in to-day,' he said, rather nervously, as if anxious for haste, yet not wishing to spoil the kindness of our first meeting again.

' But, father, surely you are not strong enough—I wonder they allowed you . . . '

' Hush, my pet. Remember that I wanted

the pleasure of coming to meet *you*, as you left your amusements to come back to the old man. Let us suppose that business had nothing to say to it . . . nothing to say to it . . . nothing ! ' he answered, caressing my hand, and repeating the words dreamily, which was so unusual in him I looked up ; but saw that, with his eyes fixed on the houses we passed, he was evidently thinking of the business in question.

Arrived at the offices where his business agents always met him, he got out rapidly, with a nervous briskness of movement that surprised me. Indeed he never waited for Bob, who had sprung out by the other door of the carriage, and was running round to offer his shoulder as a support.

' There ; do you see that ! ' exclaimed the March Hare, with admiring foolishness,

gazing after him. ‘Talk of him being long ill ; why, he hasn’t walked as briskly as that for months. Look at the pace he’s going up-stairs !’

‘But it’s not good for him, is it ?’ said I, not much wiser than Bob in matters of illness, yet more doubtful. But Bob reassured me, plunging his head momentarily into the carriage for conversation as he stood outside, for closed vehicles were not greatly to his liking. ‘I came home this morning—travelled all night,’ quoth he. ‘And he was very cheery on seeing me ; not *quite* so lively as usual perhaps, you know. As to mother? well! she did seem a little fretted with her rheumatism, and with sitting up two or three nights with father,—which last Bob thought was over-fearfulness on her part. But she had been awfully good to him ;

treated him almost as if he was the grey-headed boy himself (namely Beau). It had been much against the mother's wish that father had driven in to-day, but he had been so keen about it, she had to give way. And Bob had had time already to inspect the dogs, which were looking grand ; and so forth, and so forth, in outbursts ; with interpolated questions as to the jolly fun Rose and I must have had at Broadhams, hardly waiting for my answers.

'Then father came out.

He was walking very slowly now—very, very slowly,—leaning on the arm of an old trusted clerk in the house, who was looking rather anxiously at him, I thought. But as Bob hastened to give him his help down the steps, father paused at the top in thanks, and gently smiled at me.

‘ You tired yourself going up-stairs so quickly without help,’ I exclaimed in solicitude, settling the cushions and wraps comfortably for him.

‘ Yes, dear—that was foolish of me . . . when I have two . . . such good young caretakers,’ he answered, taking breath between each pause, and then turned to sign a farewell to the old man who had helped him ; not with his old hearty manner, seeming grave and tired, yet with the same thoughtfulness for inferiors that made him thank every beggar woman who blessed him for giving her a shilling.

‘ Don’t come inside, my boy,’ as Bob with secret rue, but composed features, was preparing for that stuffy ordeal with his back to the horses. Go on the box—you love fresh air ; and Pleasance is enough for me.’

How glad I was he said that last!—to be enough for him, was almost a full and sufficient compensation surely for all my late troubles. As if something of what was in my mind passed into his, he roused himself—after a quarter of an hour of silence during which my thoughts, reassured for him, had strayed back to late days, whilst his dear eyes being closed I did not speak for fear of disturbing him.

‘Tell me about Broadhams, my child.’

So, hastily deciding in my own mind to tell nothing that might distress him, I began repeating mere pleasant outlines and the names of the guests.

‘St. Leger!’—he said, stopping me, and looking in my face with a curious wistful kindness in his eyes I had never seen there before. ‘St. Leger; he was there—ah! ’

Under that sympathetic loving gaze, and because of something lingering and questioning in the tone, somehow—I cannot explain it better—the conscious blood told its secret in my cheeks at once; so that I turned my face to hide it and the sudden little gush of tears that suffused my eyes but must not fall. Then I found myself caressed and my hand drawn into his own and stroked, though feebly; as if he was too tired to move.

‘Darling,’ he whispered, and as if even that was an effort, ‘I thought last summer that you and he—had begun to like each other . . . Well, if Clair St. Leger will but work he is a fine young fellow . . . and I can only find it in my heart to bless whoever will make one of my children happy.’

I pressed his hand back closely, only finding voice enough to murmur lovingly:

‘Thank you : thank you, father dear—but you are so tired. We will talk about this again. I see your eyes closing—go to sleep if you can, now ; try, at least.’

What a sore pain was in my heart as I thought Clair would never, *never* work ! Ah ! if he but would !

My father nodded and closed wearily his heavy eyelids, his head dropping forward on his chest so immediately that it had plainly cost him an effort to give me his attention for even those few seconds. Taking a pillow that had been put in the carriage, I propped it on my shoulder and made him lay his head down upon it; glad to be such a tall daughter that he could rest so at his ease.

We had not gone far after this when in the growing darkness a shower lashed the carriage windows. He opened his eyes

again, no doubt, though from our positions I could not see his face, as he said like one waking out of sleep:

‘Call Bob in—he will get wet.’

Pulling the check-string I soon had the moist March Hare in cover beside us, his top-coat exhaling a mingled odour of stables, tobacco, and pet fox-terrier, to my imaginative but not unkindly mind.

‘Ah! now all is right,’ said my father, and his head nestled more heavily again on my shoulder. From time to time as the darkness deepened I could hear his stertorous breathing, which to my satisfaction grew softer and softer.

‘How nicely he is taking a rest now!’ murmured Bob, and in guarded whispers we congratulated ourselves on this blessed slumber. We were now going homeward

along the familiar roads, but only by the occasional flashing of the carriage-lamps on some white, farm, gable-wall or creepered cottage-front could I tell where we were, it was such a thick night. The rain poured continuously down in close streams, and white mist filled all the hollows and rose up to meet it.

Father slept sounder and sounder. My shoulder ached at last terribly with the strain, but I would not have stirred the thousandth part of an inch for worlds!—for *anything*!

‘Ain’t you tired? I should think so. Cheer up, it will soon be over,’ murmured Bob, bending forward encouragingly, his breath tickling my ear.

Now we turned in at the lodge-gate. The horses’ hoofs went *plop! plop!* with quite

renewed vigour up the wet drive. The bare branches of the trees, hazily illumined before us, appeared to bend and overlace each other in welcoming grey arches. ‘Home again !’ they seemed to say. ‘Loving hearts here, Pleasance ! Whatever your troubles and sorrow and love, other love will help you to bear it. We are all so sorry for you ; we have known you since childhood ; cheer up ! cheer up !’ As the horses mounted the last hill and turned round on the gravelled sweep, still all the well-known, if hidden, objects in the darkness around seemed to echo,—‘cheer up !’

Out flashed a light from the opening door, as our wheels were heard by watchful ears. Out came mother ; her graceful figure shown in dark relief in the doorway, against the strong light in the hall behind.

‘At last !’ she called anxiously, as we

drew up with a crunch of the wheels. ‘ How is your father ? ’

‘ Well ! well—couldn’t be better,’ called back Bob cheerily. ‘ He has been sleeping here on Pleasance’s shoulder all the way back ; and we have been watching him.’

‘ How are you, William ? ’ repeated my mother with a tender inflection of her voice ; as unheeding her rheumatism and the pouring rain, she came outside to the carriage-door.

But my father did not answer.

‘ Wake up, father, now ; you are at home, dear,’ I said in his ear, and took his listless hand in mine that gave no response ; so turning I said apologetically to mother, ‘ He is so fast asleep ; how shall I rouse him ? ’ With a stifled little exclamation, whether of impatience or fear I hardly knew, my mother snatched a light from one of the footmen

behind, who held it to show our invalid the carriage-steps. Turning it full on the still sleeping face, she looked a moment, then gave a cry that rings through my ears even now after years! ‘*He is dead!!*’—she cried. ‘You have both let him die; and I was not with him!’ As she spoke, she staggered backwards, catching hold of the side of the porch to support herself.

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was nearly midnight. The old family doctor who had been sent for in wild haste through the darkness, though we knew it was of *no use!* had arrived. Out with him came the trusty old clerk, on whose arm *he* had last been slowly supported down the office-steps.

How the ill news had so flown was a marvel, as always in these cases, but to the sorrowing it all seems so natural ! It seems as if the whole world ought to know our great loss, too ; and feel that one has gone from us, the like of whom we shall never, never see again.

I was lying prone on a sofa in the deserted drawing-room, which was almost in darkness but for the flickering fire-light. Crushed, crushed—as if not able to stir a finger, or think one thought. That was how I lay moaning in a soundless murmur to myself sometimes, or weakly clenching my fingers as if longing for bodily pain to ease this intolerable anguish of a sudden awful void and blank in life. Then came voices near. There had been many heretofore which seemed whispering and murmuring outside in the awed confusion of the house; but I had never heeded. These came from the saloon, the door of which stood open.

'Don't blame yourself, Mr. Bob—it was this crash that broke his heart. Nothing you could have done would have saved him,' the old doctor's voice was saying.

I raised my head at that, with a sudden start as the words thrilled through me ; next moment I was behind them in the other room. ‘ What crash ? — what broke his heart ? ’ The three men, who stood with their backs to me, all turned, startled.

‘ Oh, deary, deary me, Miss Pleasance,—I almost took you for a ghost, with your white face coming out of the darkness,’ said the old clerk pityingly and as if to gain time ; the most loquacious of the three, like those in the lower ranks of life. Bob simply looked at me, not able, poor fellow, to speak.

‘ *What is it ? — Oh do tell me, some one !* ’ I asked again, beseechingly turning imploring eyes upon them all ; and last on the old doctor. He laid his hand kindly on my shoulder.

‘ My dear child, it is perhaps better you

should know the cause of your good father's death, which was most peaceful and painless, as you saw. He had heard—ahem!' (the doctor cleared his throat, and he who had announced in his time so many deaths to sorrowing mourners, was plainly unusually troubled)—'He heard some bad business news to-day; the fear of which had brought on his late attack; and so . . .'

'He heard we were ruined! what does *that* matter now?' said Bob, bluntly and hoarsely; and sitting down by a table near, he bowed his fair young head down on his crossed arms. I looked round blankly at the others, but more in inquiry than moved by the intelligence.

'Is it true? What does he mean?'

The doctor looked at our old clerk. It was his turn now. He stared on the ground,

and shuffled his feet uneasily. ‘ Well, I’m afraid it *is* true. It’s what often enough happens, and many a man will make a second fortune after it—but this time’—His voice failed him huskily; for this time the stout patient heart we all loved so well would never more work to wipe off the unmerited disgrace.

‘ There might be something saved out of the fire yet,’ he murmured. ‘ But Mr. Beau is away yachting in the Mediterranean, worse luck!—not that *he* would be much help indeed’ (this last in an involuntary soliloquy). ‘ How is your mother?’ quickly asked the doctor. He wished to divert my stricken mind from this second dreadful calamity, no doubt, seeing I stood tearless, pale, cold, and stockstill. (As if one thought of mere money was in my mind at such an awful time !

There was no room there for consciousness of aught beyond the dear still form motionless up-stairs.)

‘She will not see me. She would not allow me to go into her room. Only her old maid, *you* know—is with her,’ I said in a wail; feeling rather than knowing the awful unspoken charge of neglect against me in the mind of my only parent left alive.

‘She is better so, my dear,’ said the old man kindly. He knew us all so well, and had seen behind the scenes in our household as in so many others. ‘Hers is not a nature that can bear much sympathy in suffering. You must let her grieve it out alone; though it seems hard.’

‘Lord help them all! But we will try to get all we can for the widow and the orphans,’ uttered the aged clerk. And some-

how at those words—making me feel for the first time *what we now were!*—the icy barrier of my tears was melted, and my sorrow streamed down like rain. As I hurried away, the two old men stared after me aghast ; but poor Bob, his honest heart unable to endure the sight, was sobbing, too, like a big child.

When Rose came home next day (to the home we already knew would soon be ours no longer!) we clung closely to each other for a few speechless moments.

‘Oh, Rose !’ I asked, ‘what did *he* say ? Was he very sorry for me ?’

‘I suppose he was,’ answered Rose very slowly ; ‘he told me to say to you, that he would write.’

‘He did ! Then it is all right. He does care really for me ! I knew his good heart

would assert itself—and that if he ever felt for me it would be now, when I need it so sorely,' I cried, feverishly excited.

Rose said nothing.

Bob and I, in the first dreadful days, had to make all the agonizing decisions about *the funeral*; terrible, hourly questions that would not let us mourn in peace. Some Frenchman has said, he would like when dying just to take off his hat with an unexpected adieu; turn the corner of the street; and so vanish. How it would spare those left the details which *must* be cared for by some one!—of our pompous funeral ceremonies, all of which seem so to vulgarize our sacred grief! For the first time in her life, our mother had broken down—and that all the more utterly. The stricken wife seemed only to feel first that my father was *dead*; next that Beau,

her idolized son, was fortuneless, almost homeless—that no new-founded and prosperous county family would ever now be established in the dear old west country of her fore-fathers, through him !

But Bob and I were two bewildered young souls. Old heads seemed now suddenly expected on our shoulders, for even questions on the business were submitted to us, into which we plunged with the recklessness of ignorance. Poor Bob insisted always on asking my advice, deferring to it in a way that frightened me, and saying himself with tears in his eyes :

‘ What does it matter what we decide on ? We might as well chuck it all up, or toss for it ! We’re so ruined, you know, that it can’t make any difference to us ; and thank God, it makes none to *him* now ! ’

If, by working with muscles and sinews till he dropped, Bob could have helped matters, he would have died for the rest of us ; but his brains were of far less use than his biceps. I, however, felt I must try to choose the lesser between the two evils so constantly brought before my faint and heartsickened mind.

Then Aunt Bee came, to our intense relief. The old lady took all at once into her vigorous management, bidding us ‘poor children’ rest. She seemed to have flown to our aid on wings of the wind ; and how she did it we never knew, for she was in Spain when our news reached her. ‘And so your fine brother-in-law, Sir Dudley, could not come to help you ! ’ she said with a significant sound, like a snort.

‘ He said it would all distress Alice so

much, he would rather not leave her; but, he will come to the funeral,' answered Rose, in an ashamed tone, as having been last at Broadhams.

'Thank him for nothing!' returned Aunt Bee in bitterness of scorn, but wiping her eyes.

Then came my letter from Clair St. Leger. Even as I tore it open, an ashamed thought darted arrowlike through my brain accusing me of forgetting, in my living love, the dear spirit whose cold remains lay stilly upstairs. But then my father would have understood; he always did. No one was more nobly thoughtful, asking no extremes of us.

So the scruple quieted, my eyes devoured the small-written, clear lines, hastily turning the page to see how much there was before

even getting the sense—Only two sides of a sheet ! As I ended, then re-read it again slowly—feeling my whole momentarily joyful being changing, chilling, my features beginning to quiver—Rose, who was watching me, could bear her sympathy of suspense no longer, and cried out, ‘What does he say ? Do tell me, dear Pleasance.

‘Oh, Rose,’ I just managed to answer before breaking down into bitter crying, ‘it is just a letter of condolence, and—only polite !’

Rose tried to comfort me with all the love a sister knows how to give, but she could *say* nothing. There was nothing to be said. At last, I raised my tear-stained face to hers and asked beseechingly :

‘Did you hear anything more about him and Mrs. Jessop ? If you did, do tell me

now, Rose ; I would rather know the worst.'

Rose, poor child, answered unwilling and slow.

' Well ; I suppose it is better to say everything. She told Amy Pawlett the day you left, that you and she were pulling caps for Clair St. Leger (you know she is often so vulgar) ; and that she was sure to win because she had the money. Besides, she knew on Alice's authority that you had given up your fortune to pay Beau's debts. She laughed, as she said to Amy how crestfallen Mr. St. Leger had looked on that Sunday afternoon, when she took occasion to tell him what a sentimental little goose you had been.'

I gazed at Rose open-eyed, almost open-mouthed. ' She said that !—how could

she? It is just as well—oh, just as well he should know it! But how could one woman act so to another, as she did to me on that Sunday?’

‘She is wicked; that is it. And we never met a wicked woman in our lives before,’ averred Rose.

That whole night I never slept, but sat up till the grey, late, winter dawn came. My thoughts were dreadful to me, either sick and sorry companions, or else like the tormentings of evil spirits; but I dared not go to bed, knowing I was too miserable to sleep, and that with the body lying in enforced quiet, the mind would have broken loose in all the more maddened wildness of working. Weak ravings, questions succeeded themselves in my brain, over and over and over again.

‘*When* did he change?—extraordinary,

fickle ! Oh, how much kinder if he had never admired me, spoken to me—ah, yes !'

There was no faith left in me in human, kind ; in friends, except my own few people ; and but little in God—though that I prayed and struggled so hard to hold through those small chill hours of the night. My old father, so good, so religious ! to die ruined and heart-broken, after all !

Then Clair ! My life seemed a waste, a desert, because I could *never* love any one again—never know the old full trust. 'Oh my father !' I thought, and then the tears came down so fast and salt I was sick with weeping. What would he have said, had he known I should suffer this ! How little had his dear, dying blessing on the man I loved been deserved !

The morning sun rose late through the

faint East, like a red fireball over the wintry woods, and the lawns that were all white with hoar-frost. It saw me kneeling in the room of death, with my head bowed over the great oak coffin, my tears bedewing the insensible wood and silver mountings beneath which lay the dear head I had so loved. Even this consolation would be gone in a few hours. It was the day of my father's funeral.

All that night, though so young and so tired, I never once closed my heavy eyes in sleep,—sorrow still fought too hard with fatigue. Then at dawn, unable to bear the strain longer, I started up from my seat, drew a wrapper round me, and crept down-stairs.

Kneeling there now, I knew the truth; letting myself be blinded with self-deception no longer. My youth was a blank, my love had been wasted, my hope and gladness of

life was a dead thing. I had lost father, lover, fortune, all. . . !

Then I must have fainted and lain cold and outstretched on the floor.

An hour or so later, when I returned to consciousness, my mother's arms were round me, and her tears—oh, blessed tears of love!—were wet on my cheek. After a long cruel night-vigil, spent like mine in loneliness of sorrow, she too had stolen down to stand by her dear dead once more—in grief all the keener that her nature was so proudly reticent, and even if longing for sympathy seemed to repel it. ‘Poor Pleasance! My child . . . my child!’ she was repeating. ‘I have been selfish—I forgot, in my own misery, how much you loved him too.’

‘Ah, mother dear, you are very good to me,’ I sobbed, my brain unstrung and hardly

conscious of what I was saying ; ‘but he cared far more for me than you do.’

‘It will be different now. We shall be more to each other in future,’ murmured my mother, low and broken. And so indeed we drew together.

CHAPTER XIV.

ONLY a little month, barely more than one month and some short days had passed, and once more I was at Broadhams.

How in times of death and great trouble, changes that in happier days would be momentous events to us, come often so thick and fast they seem but little things ! Even so my last days at Stoke—*at home!*—may be hurried over in description. My poor mother's first wish seemed to be only to leave all we had to our creditors in the ruin that had befallen us ; next to hurry away from the place which reminded her so agonizingly of the whole happiness of her life. She would have

gone the day after the funeral, I believe, if she could. Her nature was not one like mine, to cherish and brood over every little object and memory associated with her beloved dead ; but rather to fly from the dear scenes ; to put away from her sight *anything* that by recollection increased the almost unendurable pain she kept so proudly to herself. To me, it was hard to understand.

But, womanlike, my poor mother learnt to resign herself ; perforce, she stayed on at Stoke for some weeks, daily seeing all the little home-treasures, which my father and she had collected with such delight, going to the auctioneer—to the four winds, it seemed !

It was Beau's wish : that was enough. He had hurried away as soon as ever he decently could, declaring the sight of packing and bustle was too 'horrid a worry.' He

went off to town—on business he said—and thence to Broadhams : we, as women, stayed to do his work which he disliked.

Even my mother must have thought her idolized eldest-born was selfish in shirking his duties ; for she said to me in a pitiful, apologizing manner, quite new to her :

‘ His feelings are too much for him, Pleasance. I *know* that is why he cannot bear to stay ! Think of how much harder it is for him to leave his own house, than for all of us—my poor boy ! ’

And I said nothing. Harder for Beau than for *us*?—for Rose and Bob and me, who each in degree loved more and more intensely every stick and stone and tree in our beautiful home in the west !

‘ It’s a beastly shame ! ’ said Bob, nearly sobbing, as he hammered and packed with a

neatness and handiness never expected of him. ‘ Beau never cared!—He always used to like going on his fine visits better than coming home in vacation time; and, last summer, he said it was too slow a hole for him to stay in.’

As for me, the words of a still living American writer came home to me; as his laughing yet deep and tender thoughts have done to so many more hearts. ‘ A house is never a house until we have crusted it with the spoils of a hundred lives besides those of our own past;’ and on leaving home he finds to his own surprise how many roots he had struck therein, unknown to himself, each of which, at the last wrench, seemed to shriek aloud like those of the fabled mandrake. If Holmes felt this, being a man, how much more might I, a woman!—we who send

out so many tender fibres and tendrils ; clinging unreasoningly perhaps, but because of our nature, to all the objects around us among which God has ordered our lives to be mostly passed.

Such a home as it was, too ! If the Bracys had truly been no ancestors of mine, yet they themselves could hardly have cherished the legends and memories of their grand old family and Saxon hall more reverently than did I in heart. Their past seemed by virtue of my love and admiration to have been knit to my young life. Ah ! would those who came after us, feel for Stoke as I had felt ?

And so Broadhams now received my mother, Beau, and myself. (Rose was with Aunt Bee for a little while at the Barn ; and Bob was to make his home there.)

It was a change indeed from the last visit, although I had always found that great ugly house so dull. Now we lived in a few small rooms, in Alice's boudoir, and Sir Dudley's study. The great reception-rooms were daily opened and warmed by the house-keeper's directions, but Alice with a shudder turned from the doors: 'they are dreadful without a large party! as quiet as the grave,' she exclaimed.

Quiet as the grave! It seemed to me—going heavily through the marble inner hall, where only my own footsteps now made resounding echoes, and no laughing blue eyes would greet mine in the round gallery above any more—that thus it should be! here and wherever was one of his dear ones to mourn our dead. As we three women trailed our black dresses over the inlaid floors, or met

each other wandering solitary in the lone red corridors, the silence and even deathly stillness of the great house was rest and soothing to my sore spirit.

So it was also to my poor mother. Here, though we were almost beggars, no sight or sound of poverty suggested our future lot. Alice, her darling, was here in a safe harbour where none of our late ills would ever surely threaten her to the end of life ; was idolized, *rich . . . !*

‘It is my one great comfort, now, to see her so happy !’ murmured my mother to me one evening, after we had been there two or three days. We stood in the boudoir, where, inside, clear firelight sparkled on the many pretty *objets de luxe* lavished around. Outside, the trees of the flat park to westward darkened almost grandly in their heavy masses against

a dull red band of sky, where the sun had set. ‘Yes: it is a *blessing* indeed to feel that I have done so well, at least, for *her*,’ she went on, thinking aloud unconsciously. My mother’s ways were strangely changed now in such small matters; also looking up I saw tears standing in her still beautiful eyes. ‘Who knows, too, but that you and Rose may be just as fortunate; and all through this, my dear? For, though *I* can do so little for either of you now, Alice will take one or both of you out next year in London, of course. . .?’

Her voice died away in musing. Mine was silent.

What use to cry out to her, with impulsive affection, flinging my arms around her neck —as I would have done with the other dear dead parent, who was no longer by to understand all my ways and thoughts!

‘Don’t speak of London. Oh, don’t think of all that—I would far, far rather stay with you.’

Yes ! we had drawn together, my mother and I ; since the one supreme hour of our mutual great sorrow. But still it takes a far longer time to bring about that perfect understanding, that mutual giving and taking of opinion and wishes which is the basis of the best affection, even though the superior intellect must always lead. It may be engendered by years of affectionate life together, as between my father and myself: or it may be lit, as it were in an instant, between two souls who have only just met.

And so my mother now looked on me fully as her child, perhaps for the first time ; in my life, not as a Brown merely, but as a

Beaumanoir also ; therefore her mind at once turned to governing my life for me—to shaping my fortune so far as now in her lay. So she had done with Alice, so had thought to do with little Rose. All the caprices of her idolized Beau were adopted as her own ardent wishes. His changing fancies hitherto, now for a seat in parliament, now for diplomacy, art, music, were the secret ambitions of her life. But as to me—having been my father's child, he had let me grow up beside him as might a flower, to which he gave love and care, but to which God would send from heaven the sun and rain and perhaps storm as best pleased Him in its future life. Poor mother ! Poor Pleasance ! How I longed that she would only be content to do the same by me ; but dared not tell her so.

Sir Dudley was very kind to us all the

time we stayed at Broadhams, certainly—in his own way.

He was moved by seeing his worshipped Alice hanging round my mother's neck the first evening we came, caressing and pitying her. With all his heaviness of mind he had a good heart, and his impressions were very slow to change. Therefore he and Beau went out together morning after morning, shooting, or passing their time round the farm or home-stables ; while in the afternoons he would take out Alice for a walk or drive. A fortnight had nearly passed : and yet he never showed by word or look that *he* wearied of the quiet enforced on his household by the presence of the widow and the fatherless under his roof. Perhaps he was glad to have Alice so entirely to himself, almost for the first time since they were married.

But after a very few days, Alice's pretty attentions to my mother began to wane and cease.

It struck me daily more how my sister grew quite dismal—just as we, whom she had met with almost smiling consolations, began to feel reasonably cheered by this grateful rest after all our terrible late bustle and grief. She was like a caged bright bird ; and several times exclaimed to me privately, while looking at her slender dark figure in one of the many mirrors around us in the magnificently dreary rooms :

‘ How I hate black ! It never became my complexion—we might as well be two nuns here, I declare, with my poor mother for abbess.’

This little outburst of impatience surprised me slightly. But I was startled when, a day

later, Alice declared with sudden vehemence as we were alone together :

‘ Rain again ! It seems always raining here since you came ; or if it is fine there is nothing to do but drive with Dudley in the pony-carriage. If it was not for mother and you, we should be off to Cannes and get some sunshine ! . . . Oh, of course I would not be unkind for worlds—’ (I had only looked up at her, too much taken aback to speak.) ‘ I’m sure, ever since my marriage I have always been doing my best for you all ; but one has to make such sacrifices *always* to one’s family.’

‘ I am certain, Alice, that if mother only guessed you wished to go abroad, she would not like to delay you by our stay here. For myself, I should be dreadfully sorry to keep you on our account—even for a day.’

My lips trembled a little and tears stood in my eyes. Ridiculous!—but then her *tone* more than the mere words had cut me to the quick. So lightly careless of our poverty and troubles; so heartless as to her own due share of grief! She might have been an utter alien, instead of our adored beauty, our family pride.

‘There! you fly off in a temper at once, Pleasance. I wish you combined a little more sense with your sensitiveness. You have so many fine feelings that, as Jenny Jessop once said, she was sure I never could help hurting *some* of them,’ retorted Alice flippantly; apparently half-consoled for her ill-humour by her own smartness of speech, and the sense of having roused me to see her wrongs.

‘What is the matter, do you say, Dudley?’

as her spouse, in his shooting-coat, came heavily in at that moment, and looked at us both in some slow wonder.

‘Why, only that Pleasance here is in a passion at my merely saying if it was not for our duties to them I should be off enjoying myself at Nice—which is perfectly true! . . . What—play chess with you, as it is a wet day? My dear old man, you must be perfectly MAD! I drive with you when it’s fine, and try to play billiards with you in the evening; but, for heaven’s sake, don’t ask me to become a still more exemplary wife!’

‘It was only to please *you*, I thought of it; as you say you are bored to death lately, and hate reading,’ returned poor Sir Dudley, on the defensive. For, to do him justice, he would have far more willingly snored and

smoked in his own den all afternoon ; and also at nights he suffered slow martyrdom from Alice's determination not to leave himself and Beau the sole enjoyment of the billiard-table, while she was so impatient as to be a far more miserable player than even I, in my mediocrity.

' Well, any way, I positively won't do anything now ; unless I make Julie pull out all my dresses, to see if they are worth keeping till after—or else I'll curl myself up in the boudoir and go to sleep,' yawned Alice, affecting a little mock-defiant laugh, and she betook herself off therewith.

Sir Dudley looked after her admiringly, then turning to me, meaning to be kind—though plainly his best sympathies had gone out of the door.

‘Come, Pleasance, don’t be vexed. ’Pon my honour, we are both only too glad to have you all here; but it *is* hard on Alice, poor girl! Just when she was expecting to enjoy herself in town, don’t you see?’

‘Exactly so. It was a pity my father did not wait to die till after the London season,’ said I, low, but with razor keenness in my bitterness of spirit. Sir Dudley stared at me rather puzzled, but answered piously with a reproving air:

‘Well—these things are all in the hands of Providence.’

When he left the room, my first thought was anger that I had not made him *feel* more! The next came remorse that I, who had never said bitter things before in my life, should be only sorry that my woman’s play of tongue

was too rapier-like for Sir Dudley even to see the attack. Some people only understand words like bludgeons.

Then, I remember so well how my thought strayed from the memory of my dear father to that of the only other person (besides my old friend Mr. Bracy) who had ever seemed to understand me thoroughly. Seemed! Had it been mere seeming? Surely, surely, for however short a time, he had loved me! Each day since we came, I had meant to ask Alice after Clair St. Leger; but always my courage failed me.

This very evening—Why should it have been this very evening? . . . why must troubles always come together? This very evening, as we were gathered together about five-o'clock in that little ante-room where I had spent such a miserable Sunday night, in

came Beau with some letters for himself brought by the afternoon post.

‘I say—here are two offers already for Stoke. The old place will not be long in the market,’ he said. I looked up in agitation.

‘Oh, Beau, who wants to—to have Stoke ? May I see ?’—Beau eyed me with languid surprise. Plainly, abhorring any prospect of business worries as he did, my eagerness was highly displeasing to him. He ejaculated, ‘Presently—pray do not worry, Pleasance. I hate interference. Mother . . . Alice . . . will *you* read these ?’

Humiliated, my trembling fingers took up a copy of the ‘World’ a fortnight old ; and I turned its pages hardly knowing what I read. Suddenly the name ‘Clair St. Leger’ caught my eye with startling distinctness. A paragraph stated, ‘We understand that a marriage

is rumoured as likely to take place soon between Mr. Clair St. Leger and Mrs. Jessop, widow of the late Josiah Jessop, Esq.' There followed a short tribute to the charms of my rival's person and mind, combined with her large dower of fortune.

Curiously, before my eyesight had caught more than the one striking name, I seemed to guess all that followed. Remaining very quiet, without the smallest feeling of emotion beyond long-held breath, I read it over and over again, my eyes seeming glued to the page. Nothing reached my ears of what the rest were saying—although they were talking with animation (and, as I afterwards heard, about the offers for Stoke); but I rose and slipped away to my room.

There, would even my rival, would any woman with a living heart in her, have been

able to rejoice during that hour, could she have guessed at its bitterness to me? Not that I was sorry—I would have been really *glad* to have it settled, at last; to know that the worst misery, uncertainty, was over! *If only they would both be quick and end it! . . .*

Even here, at Broadhams, the power of association had revived in my heart some faint hopes, or rather thoughts; as spring flowers will sometimes put out a few mistaken blossoms in autumn.

Oh, Clair! Clair! it may be best for us two to part, I thought; but was it well done in the doing? A letter—a few words of regret—and the links that had bound us would have been severed so much more easily, almost without pain. Well, the one would have been my woman's way: the other, no doubt, was that of a man.

That evening, after dinner, I asked Alice with an easy air of carelessness, while standing by the fire with my back to her,

‘ What is this about Mrs. Jessop and her marriage in the “ World ” ? You never told me any news about it . ’

‘ What nonsense you do talk, Pleasance ! ’ she returned. ‘ You must have heard me talking of it ever so often to Beau and mother since you came.’ (Never once !) ‘ All I know is, Jenny wrote to me last week, declaring she did not know how such a thing had got into the papers ; it was too unkind, and I was to tell every one so ! . . . Pretty innocent ! I daresay she put it in herself. She is quite capable of it—I’ll answer for that. Heigh-ho ! —well, I did my best for them both when they were here. Clair would never have *really* suited—well, any one who

had not money.' Alice's voice softened a little at the last words. Did she guess anything? If so, after that slight sign of sympathy, no other word ever more passed between us two on the subject.

END OF VOL. II.

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